

The practice of chairs' work -  
How academic managers create knowledge

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## PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Researchers who focus on chairs or department heads agree that the majority of important decisions concerning teaching, research, and service, -the main domains for institutions of higher education-, are made in the departments (e.g. Bennett, 1983; Roach, 1976; Tucker, 1992). The department chair who manages and leads a department therefore has an enormous impact on “the ultimate success of the institution” in terms of effectively realizing appropriate goals at the department level (Bennett & Figuli, 1990, p. xi).

In the last fifty years numerous changes in the demographic, economical, political, public, social, global, and technological domain have challenged institutions of higher education. These challenges demand reactive and proactive changes not just from institutions of higher education as a whole, but more in particular from the academic departments where the main changes need to be implemented (see Hecht, Higgerson, Gmelch, & Tucker, 1999, p. 9, 14). As for the challenges mentioned above, the chair “... must be concerned with how department faculty cope with these changes both at the individual and collective levels” (Hecht et al., 1999, p. 14). Thus, debate, experiments, and solutions all need to take place at the local level in the department. As the chair is the person to initiate, guide or control a large part of these activities, over the years this has led to an ever expanding list of duties, responsibilities, and roles the chair has to fulfill (e.g. see Hecht et al., 1999; Tucker, 1992).

At the same time, institutions do not adequately prepare chairs for their jobs (e.g. Hecht et al., 1999). Research has shown over and over again that chairs are forced to learn in practice (e.g. Staton-Spicer & Spicer, 1987; Tucker, 1992). The main reason for this, as offered by the literature, is that institutions of higher education do not offer sufficient opportunities for chair preparation and training, or mentoring, if at all (Hecht et al., 1999; Tucker, 1992). A minor, more practical, reason is that chairs’ available time is limited and interrupted by ‘casualties’ that need to be attended to immediately (Seedorf & Gmelch, 1989) which oftentimes interferes with going to training sessions or workshops if they are organized.

On the other hand, there is a vast amount of literature on how to be a chair as well as numerous scholarly papers, the majority of which focus on (1) tasks, roles, and responsibilities of chairs (e.g. Gmelch & Miskin, 1993; Seagren, Creswell, & Wheeler, 1993); (2) leadership (e.g. Lucas, 1994; Lucas & Associates, 2000); (3) role conflict and role ambiguity (e.g. Bennett, 1982; Gmelch & Seedorf, 1989); and (4) balance and stress (e.g. Gmelch & Gates, 1995; Seagren et al., 1993). Beside identifying problems that are inherent to the position of chair (for example, stress, role ambiguity, lack of power), a large part of the chair literature is rather prescriptive as it describes *what* an effective/successful department chair should be and do, for example, how a chair can and needs to be a team leader in order to handle the numerous changes that are challenging institutions of higher education (Lucas & Associates, 2000).

However, the literature does not specifically address *how* the chair can achieve this ideal without sufficient preparation, training, and support. As the chair’s job becomes ever more complex, it becomes more important to get a better insight at how chairpersons actually do their job, that is, the practice of a chair’s work. More importantly we need to know how chairs deal with or handle new problems and challenges that arise while on the job. As it is the case that chairs *do* learn in practice, it is necessary to investigate *how* chairs cope with problems *in situ*, that is, by participating “in the culturally designed settings of everyday life” (Lave, 1993, p. 5-6).

Therefore, this study into the practice of chairs will focus on the following research questions:

How do chairs learn by handling new or unique problems/challenges in situ?  
Which strategies, methods, and resources do they use and why?

## **CHAIR LITERATURE: EVERYDAY LIFE, PROBLEMS, LEARNING, AND CULTURES**

In order to study the research questions mentioned above it is necessary to have an understanding about chairs, their practice, and their environment. In the extended version of this proposal, I discussed in depth our knowledge, and gaps in our knowledge, of chairs as based on empirical studies and experience-based or anecdotal essays to date. Here we will contend ourselves with a brief summary of the key ideas from this literature review as relevant to the research questions.

In particular, I looked at (1) the chairs' everyday life and practice in terms of tasks, roles, role conflict and role ambiguity, and power. The number of tasks and roles a chair is expected to take on has drastically increased (Bennett & Figuli, 1990; Hecht et al., 1999; Tucker, 1992). Furthermore, the chairs' roles and tasks change frequently as a reflection of developments and trends in higher education. In addition, issues of role conflict, role ambiguity, and (lack of) power are part of a chair's experience (Gmelch & Gates, 1995; Seagren et al., 1993; Wolverson, Wolverson, & Gmelch, 1999). This is mainly due to the multiple roles a chair has to fulfill by serving multiple constituencies and due to his "Janus" position (e.g. Gamble, 1988), being both a faculty member and an administrator. All these elements of the chair's practice are relevant in my study to the extent that the way chairs perceive their roles, tasks, and priorities, and how they experience role conflict, ambiguity, and power might influence how they act on new problems, moreover, how they learn by dealing with these problems.

I, furthermore, looked at (2) the chairs' problems in terms of transitional and socialization challenges; problems that originate in daily tasks; and macro challenges (of a demographic, societal, economic, global, and technological nature) that impact institutions of higher education in general and chairs as well. The literature has shown over and over again that new chairs, especially those who lack administrative experience and have not received adequate leadership training, have a hard time coping with numerous professional and personal challenges that originate in the differences in work culture between that of the faculty and that of the department chair (Bennett, 1982; Gmelch, 2002; Gmelch & Parkay, 1999; Gmelch & Seedorf, 1989). An example of this is the transition from the faculty member's relative autonomous work culture to a culture of accountability towards the hierarchically-structured administration. In this study, I will not specifically focus on the socialization process. However, based on research (Gmelch & Parkay, 1999), I presume that the completeness or phase of the chair's transition will influence his/her "openness" to other problems and how to handle these problems.

In my study, I will mainly focus on problems originating in daily tasks and macro developments in higher education. We do know quite a lot about the kind of problems chairs have to deal with that originate from daily tasks, tasks that can be divided into strategic, resource, and faculty issues (Gmelch & Miskin, 1995, p. 7). We also know that it is often the case that chairs feel unprepared for almost all aspects of their daily job (Gmelch & Miskin, 1993, p. 184).

On the other hand, there are hardly any studies that focus on the implications of macro developments in higher education on the chair's activities and that of the department (with some welcome exceptions). In books on chairs from the 1980s and beginning 90s (e.g. Bennett, 1983; Bennett & Figuli, 1990; Booth, 1982; Moses & Roe, 1990; Tucker, 1992), macro demographic, societal, economic, or global challenges were not discussed at all, presumably because the environment of the chair was still considered stable. As a beginning chair, one was expected to learn how to work on, for example, budget and faculty issues; tasks that, apart from some changes in institutional policy, fluctuated only minimally. As such the skills a chair needed were static as well; once one learned the "chair repertoire", it was mostly a matter of "doing the job". In more recent books (e.g. Hecht et al., 1999) we see a shift in focus. Although the macro challenges are reviewed only briefly, often in the introduction sections to justify the rationale of studying chairs, if at all, scholars have realized that the department and thus the chair's position is changing (Lucas, 1994; Lucas & Associates, 2000; Walvoord et al., 2000). The environment is viewed no longer as a static entity nor is it an option not to deal with external changes and developments. The department is involved in a dynamic relationship with the environment. The conclusion is clear: chairs play a pivotal role in change. However, not often a direct and clear link is made between these external challenges and the chair's practice. The implications of these challenges for the chair's activities and development and that of the department are not explained. An exception to this is Lucas (1994; Lucas & Associates, 2000). In general, however, there are no studies that focus on how chairs cope with some of these macro challenges, that is, how these changes are reflected in how the chairs acts on and reacts with the given situation (of these challenges), especially over time. In addition, it would be very helpful to know what resources the chair uses to handle macro challenges in his day-to-day life.

Subsequently, I reviewed the literature on (3) the process and content of learning of chairs. It is generally agreed that chairs do not receive effective preparation, training and education and scholars have been calling for a radical new approach to leadership development for at least twenty years (e.g. Booth, 1982; Gmelch, 2002). However, not much has changed. Why? In reality we know that chairs do handle new problems and cope with new challenges thus we have to assume that in some way they learn how to. But what is actually known about what and how chairs learn? How do they learn their job if not by training?

The general answer that the literature provides is that chairs learn on the job, by experience, and trial and error. One of the main frameworks that is being used to study new chairs is socialization theory (Bragg, 1980; Gmelch & Parkay, 1999; Gmelch & Seedorf, 1989; Spicer & Staton, 1992; Staton-Spicer & Spicer, 1987). However, apart from socialization theory, which limits itself to beginning chairs, there is no significant research on how chairs actually learn and which strategies and resources they use to handle problems in daily life. Although the chair literature acknowledges that relationships such as peers, mentors, and networks at work are important resources that chairs can mobilize for learning (see especially Booth, 1982), no attention has been paid to date to the specific situation or context of how and when a person mobilizes these relational resources. In addition, studies on professional development of chairs (e.g. Creswell, Seagren, & Henry, 1980) show ambiguous results as neither researchers nor chairs clarify what kind of knowledge chairs actually use, the kind of knowledge they need, and how learning or transfer of this knowledge/skills need to take place.

Finally, I focused on (4) the cultures in which the chair is situated and that influences his or her work. As we have seen, chairs, as members of the academic organization, are cocreators of and participants in several cultures, namely the general culture of an educational organization, the

culture of a particular (type of) institution, the culture of the academic profession, the disciplinary culture, and last but not least, the departmental culture at the intersection of all the aforementioned cultures<sup>1</sup>. However, not all cultures are equally relevant for or equally influential on chairs. An individual chair can have a high impact on the local department culture but has less impact on the disciplinary culture. Nonetheless, the latter has a profound influence on the chair and how he/she views the academic world. Therefore, I will include chairs from various disciplines in my sample. If we have an understanding of the cultures in which the chair acts and learns, we are hopefully better able to understand the how and why of a chair's actions and his or her use of resources "in situ".

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### A Rationale

In search for a framework that could help me to answer the research questions, and more generally understand the practice of a chair's work, I came across a research perspective focused on individual practice in a social and societal/historical setting (Chaiklin, 1993). This perspective is being studied by representatives from multiple theoretical traditions, such as critical psychology, ecological psychology, sociocultural psychology, cognitive anthropology, activity theory, phenomenology, and ethnomethodology (Chaiklin, 1993; Lave, 1993). Numerous models and theories have been associated with this perspective, for example, situated activity / learning / experience, cultural learning, cognition in practice, and distributed cognition, but in particular social practice. In general, this perspective looks at "situated everyday practice" and claims "that persons acting and the social world of activity cannot be separated" (Lave, 1993, p. 4-5); moreover, that "... relations among person, activity, and situation, as they are given in social practice, [are] itself viewed as a single encompassing theoretical entity." (Lave, 1993, p. 7) [see also **Figure 1**]. One of the main ideas (see Lave, 1993, p. 5) in this perspective is that the situation or context in which the person acts and the activities of daily life are in flux; they are continuously changing. As the focus is on participation of the person in practice, changing participation is argued to be a form of learning. The conclusion is that "learning is ubiquitous in ongoing activity, though often unrecognized as such" (Lave, 1993, p. 5); that is, learning is taken to be an aspect of everyday life and work (Lave, 1993, p. 8). As Lave phrases it:

We have come to the conclusion, [...], that there is no such thing as 'learning' sui generis, but only changing participation in the culturally designed settings of everyday life. Or, to put it the other way around, participation in everyday life may be thought of as a process of changing understanding in practice, that is, as learning (Lave, 1993, p. 5-6).

Below, I show how this perspective can be related to the main elements of my research questions. First of all, as we have seen, research has shown that chairs learn their jobs mainly in practice. Therefore, the everyday practice of chairs should be our first point of attention. Secondly, as I am interested in how chairs handle new challenges *in situ/practice*, we need to acknowledge the contextual and situational differences that play a role in the solution a chair

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<sup>1</sup> For general information on university cultures, see for example (Baldrige, Curtis, Ecker, & Riley, 1977; Bergquist, 1992; Chaffee, 1983; Kuh & Whitt, 2000; Peterson & Spencer, 2000; Tierney, 1988, 1990) (Cohen & March, 1974). For department culture, see (Austin, 1994, 1996; Seagren et al., 1993). For information on disciplinary culture, see (Biglan, 1973a, b; Clark, 1987).

takes. Differences in economical, political, demographic, and cultural characteristics of the institution, department, and academic discipline sometimes demand solutions and actions that are specific to the situation and the department (Seagren et al., 1993). In other words, we need to “acknowledge the fundamental imprint of interested parties, multiple activities, and different goals and circumstances, on what constitutes ‘knowing’ on a given occasion or across a multitude of interrelated events” (Lave, 1993, p. 13). This in particular is a major element of situated practice.

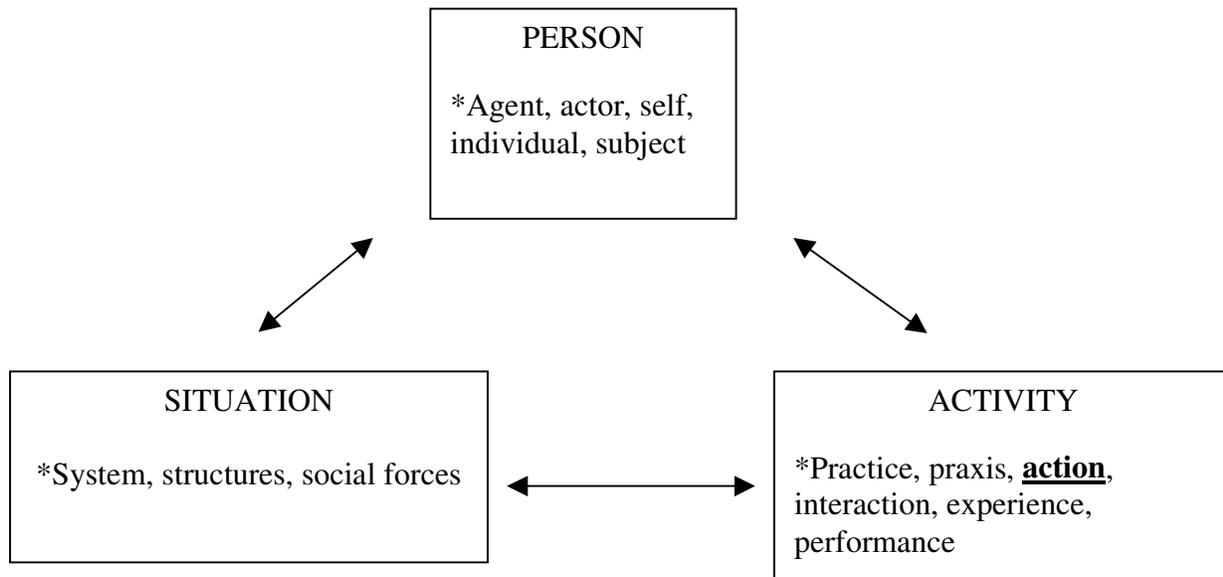
Thirdly, as I believe that chairs have to cope with new challenges, whether on a smaller or larger scale, on an everyday basis, it is relevant to look at a theory that claims that learning is “an aspect of everyday practice” (Lave, 1993, p. 8).

Fourthly, as we have seen before, chairs in the practice of doing their work need diverse skills and types of knowledge. Theories of situated practice are useful as a perspective for this study as they acknowledge the diversity of knowledge. Moreover, they assume that knowledge is dynamic not static, meaning that which is considered knowledge is changeable over time and depends on the situation and context.

Finally, it is very likely that chairs also need a variety of strategies and methods to acquire the diverse skills and types of knowledge. In contrast to the more foundational theories about learning, which make the epistemological assumption that learning needs to take place in particular settings and in reserved periods of time, “theories of situated practice do not dichotomize between learning and human activity (Lave, 1993, p. 12). This infers that people learn all day long by being active, whether that is by reading books, going to training sessions, networking, or merely participating in a conversation. In my opinion, therefore, in order to study chairs’ practice and learning how to handle new or unique problems, this perspective will be very helpful as it has the ability to broaden the researcher’s perspective on possible strategies and resources for acquiring knowledge that traditionally would not be considered learning.

In addition, I believe that this perspective is one of the few perspectives which argues and shows that learning *in* practice, that is, learning *as* practice, is as valid a viewpoint as the more traditional learning theories which decontextualize learning (Chaiklin, 1993; Lave, 1993). Our focus then shifts away from the lack of formal learning to the wealth of improvisational and informal learning that provide chairs with sufficient and adequate knowledge not only to survive but, in quite a few cases, to prosper.

**FIGURE 1: Basic model of social practice**



## **SOCIAL PRACTICE THEORIES**

### **(1) Social Practice**

Social practice is an existing theoretical tradition with “roots in the work of Marx, Bourdieu (1977), Sahlins (e.g. 1981), and Giddens (1979)” (Lave, 1988, p. 15), which “seek to explain relations between human action and the social or cultural system at the level of everyday activities in culturally organized settings” (Lave, 1988, p. 14). I have chosen to use the term *social practice* in this study as it best captures the relationship between the elements of agent, society, culture, practice, action, structure, and everyday life. However, social practice theory is not the only perspective looking at these elements; they form the basis of numerous other models and theoretical viewpoints, as mentioned above. Let me below briefly point out how these theories differ in at least three aspects.

First of all, although the theories and models all include elements like agent, practice, and context, scholars define or construct the individual elements differently. For example, some theories define agent as a single person while other theories view also non-human elements as agents. In addition, the interrelationships between these elements differ in various theories and frameworks. In activity theory, for example, single actions are always imbedded in larger structures of activity and history. Finally, it can be said that different scholars put a major focus on different elements or their relationships. As such, some models show a heavier focus on, for example, agent, activity, culture or history. This is not to say that they do not focus on the other elements at all; they do, just to a lesser extent or on a different level. For example, in Wertsch, Del Rio, and Alvarez’s perspective of sociocultural psychology (1995), historical developments are less determinative for socio-cultural mediated action than in other perspectives, such as

Engeström's activity theory (1987; 1993). In conclusion, it is no surprise that due to the various differences in meaning, the terminology scholars use differs as well. For example, instead of the term agent, also person, actor, individual, or subject is used; instead of the term practice, also activity, praxis, action, interaction, and experience is used; instead of the term context, also situation, system, structure, world, and social forces is used (Ortner, 1984, p. 144, 151-2).

Realizing that I do not do justice to the various different viewpoints, below I will, nonetheless, try to convey to the reader what can be considered the most basic concepts, namely agent, practice, and context, and how these are interrelated. It is difficult to discuss these three elements in a "neat" and "orderly" fashion as if they were completely separate. It is not that we cannot distinguish between the elements. Indeed, it is necessary that we do as this analysis forms one of the main foundations on which this perspective is built. However, one of the main assumptions underlying this perspective and which forms the base of Giddens' structuration theory (Giddens, 1979), is that "structure is both input to and output of human actions" (Wenger, 1998b, p. 281). Therefore, structure, person, and activity are constitutive of one another (Bauman, 1973; Bourdieu, 1977; Lave, 1993, p. 7; Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 50; Ortner, 1984).

## **(2) Agent, practice, context: The basic elements of social practice**

### *Agent/Actor*

The agent or actor is the "acting unit" (Ortner, 1984, p. 149) participating in practice whether that is an actual individual or representatives of a particular type (for example, sailors) (Ortner, 1984, p. 149). To reinforce the notion that an actor exists and acts as part of a social world, researchers in general do not refer merely to "a person" as the unit of analysis but to a "person-in-action" or a "person-acting" (Lave, 1988) or "individual-operating-with-mediational means", a term used by Wertsch (Wertsch, 1995, p. 64).

To be a member or representative of a particular group or type, one does not necessarily have to be experienced in the activity or profession, that is, an 'expert'. Participants in practice also include newcomers, often described as apprentices (see e.g. Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, p. 32).

### *Activity / practice*

Activity or practice is that in which agents, that is, representatives from a particular group, profession, or vocation, take part. Taking a dialectical viewpoint, we can say that by participating in practice, we are part of a practice and co-create the practice. As Wenger phrases it, "the concept of practice connotes doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do. In this sense, practice is always social practice." (Wenger, 1998b, p. 47). As the actors or agents take part in practice, they are, therefore, called practitioners.

As already said before, for scholars of social practice, participation of an agent/actor in an activity or practice is equal to learning (e.g. Lave, 1993, p. 5-6, 8). To distinguish this kind of learning from learning in a school or training setting, Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989, p. 33) define it as *authentic* activity as it is always "situated in the cultures in which they [the practitioners] work, within which they negotiate meanings and construct understanding" (Brown et al., 1989, p. 35). Therefore, practitioners belonging to the same group or type are considered

by some scholars part of a community-of-practice (for example, Lave (1991) and Wenger (1998a; 1998b; 2000; 2002))<sup>2</sup>.

So, what sort of practice or action are we talking about when studying practice (Ortner, 1984, p. 149)? In general, practice could include all actions people take but it is possible to distinguish between two categories. One kind of study, originated in Marxist traditions, focuses more on practice in relationship to the product of the constraints and burdens put forward by culture, context, and structure. Culture here is seen as a limiting factor that “restricts and inhibits them [actors] from seeing, feeling, and doing.” (Ortner, 1984, p. 152). Other studies focus on practice in terms of a cooperative, reciprocal, or exchange-based relationship between actor and social world. Culture and structure here are seen as enhancing factors (Engeström & Cole, 1997, p. 308; Ortner, 1984, p. 147, 149, 157). However, as several scholars correctly have pointed out, we should not forget that a practice also includes the diverging aspects of practice, namely the variation in interpretation, sensemaking and attributing meaning to actions, artifacts etc which often lead to power struggles and conflict (Gherardi, Nicolini, & Odella, 1998, p. 278).

A next point that needs to be clarified is the time period that is the focus of study of practice. Ortner (1984, p. 150) distinguishes between “ad hoc decision making” or “relatively short-term ‘moves’” and more long-range ‘projects’. As my study focuses on challenges that have been handled by the chair in the past over a six-month time period, thus in retrospect, I will commit to the latter description of practice. Putting single actions in a broader context will also facilitate sensemaking in the analysis phase of this study as “most moves are intelligible only within the context of these larger plans” (Ortner, 1984, p. 150).

A final point I make in my attempt to give meaning to the element of action in this framework is the question which kinds of action are most crucial in a study of practice. Ortner argues that studies of practice generally have “a view of action largely in terms of pragmatic choice and decision making, and/or active calculating and strategizing” (Ortner, 1984, p. 150). In other words, actors are considered to behave as they do because of rational, pragmatic, self-interested motives (p. 151). However, Ortner claims that “highly patterned and routinized behavior”, characterized by little reflection, should also be part of the action that is being studied (Ortner, 1984, p. 150), mainly as it implies unconscious behavior that is crucial in the continuation or reproduction of a certain practice. I agree with Ortner on this point. Nonetheless, I will limit myself to studying action as pragmatic choice. I will study actions that took place in the past using interviews. By talking to people in retrospect, I am necessarily limited to hear the conscious actions they took, leaving out the routinized, therefore, often unconscious, behavior.

### *Context / situation*

Context is the third main element of the social practice model that is a point of fierce debate among scholars. Discussing how context ‘comes to be’, Lave (1993) referred to a division in standpoint in various research traditions, taking as a starting point either the macro (historical/societal) structures or the more micro (relational) interactions. Activity theory uses as starting point the macro historical structures. In this tradition,

any particular action is socially constituted, given meaning by its location in societally, historically generated systems of activity. Meaning is not created through individual intentions; it is mutually constituted in relations between activity systems and persons acting, and has a relational character” (p. 18).

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<sup>2</sup> For a critique of this concept, see Conty and Willmott (2000) and Knight and Trowler (2001, p. 64).

Representatives from activity theory claim that “objective social structures exist” (p. 20). In very general terms, context is the historical, social, economical, and political stage on and through which activity takes place.

From a phenomenological perspective, on the other hand, researchers start from micro relational interactions. In this tradition, the ontological premise is “that situations are constructed as people organize themselves to attend to and give meaning to figural concerns against the ground of ongoing social interaction” (p. 19). Representatives from the phenomenological perspective claim that social structures only exist in “social-interactional construction in situ” (p. 20). Context must be conceived as a “product which is co-produced together with the activities it supports: agents, objects, activities, and material and symbolical artifacts all constitute a heterogeneous system that evolves over time” (Gherardi et al., 1998, p. 275).

It is not part of this study to definitely answer what context is, whether it is constructed (if so, how and by whom) or whether it exists outside of people. Nonetheless, I hope that the discussion above on the points of debate around context has made it once more clear that scholars using a social and societal/historical perspective on practice vary considerably in their conceptualization of context. There is no shared tradition that newcomers in this field can follow. It is up to the researcher to select a context appropriate for his/her study. In addition, it also shows again the inseparability of agent, activity, and context.

Concerning this proposed study, I limit my discussion of context to a focus on culture, particularly the organizational, disciplinary, professional, and institutional culture. These four forms of culture include particular historical (e.g. values and traditions), social (e.g. behavior and dynamics), and political (governance and policy) aspects that are considered relevant for an analysis of departments. More macro economical, political, cultural, and social systems fall outside the scope of this study.

### **(3) Mediational Means: Another concept in social practice**

As mentioned before, the literature focusing on an individual perspective in a social and societal/historical setting is very diverse. Therefore, in this proposal I will not review specific studies or specific authors as, in my view, this cannot help me to understand the particulars of the practice of chairs. However, I will use an additional concept, which plays an important role in the social practice literature, and which has influenced the development of a “working model” relevant to a study of chairs [Figure 2].

One of the main ideas in theories focusing on social practice is that of mediational means, also called cultural tools (Wertsch et al., 1995, p. 21), or structuring resources (Lave, 1988). Mediational means function as a bridge between actions of individuals or groups and the cultural, institutional, historical context or setting (Wertsch et al., 1995, p. 21). The idea behind this is that

humans have access to the world only indirectly, or mediately, rather than directly, or immediately. This applies both with regard to how humans obtain information about the world and how they act on it – two processes that are usually viewed as being fundamentally intertwined.” (Wertsch et al., 1995, p. 21).

Mediational means do not have a clear-cut meaning. The presence of a mean or tool in a system “does not mechanically determine the way it is actually used and conceived of by the subjects” (Engeström, 1990, p. 174). Mediational means receive their meaning in an interpretive

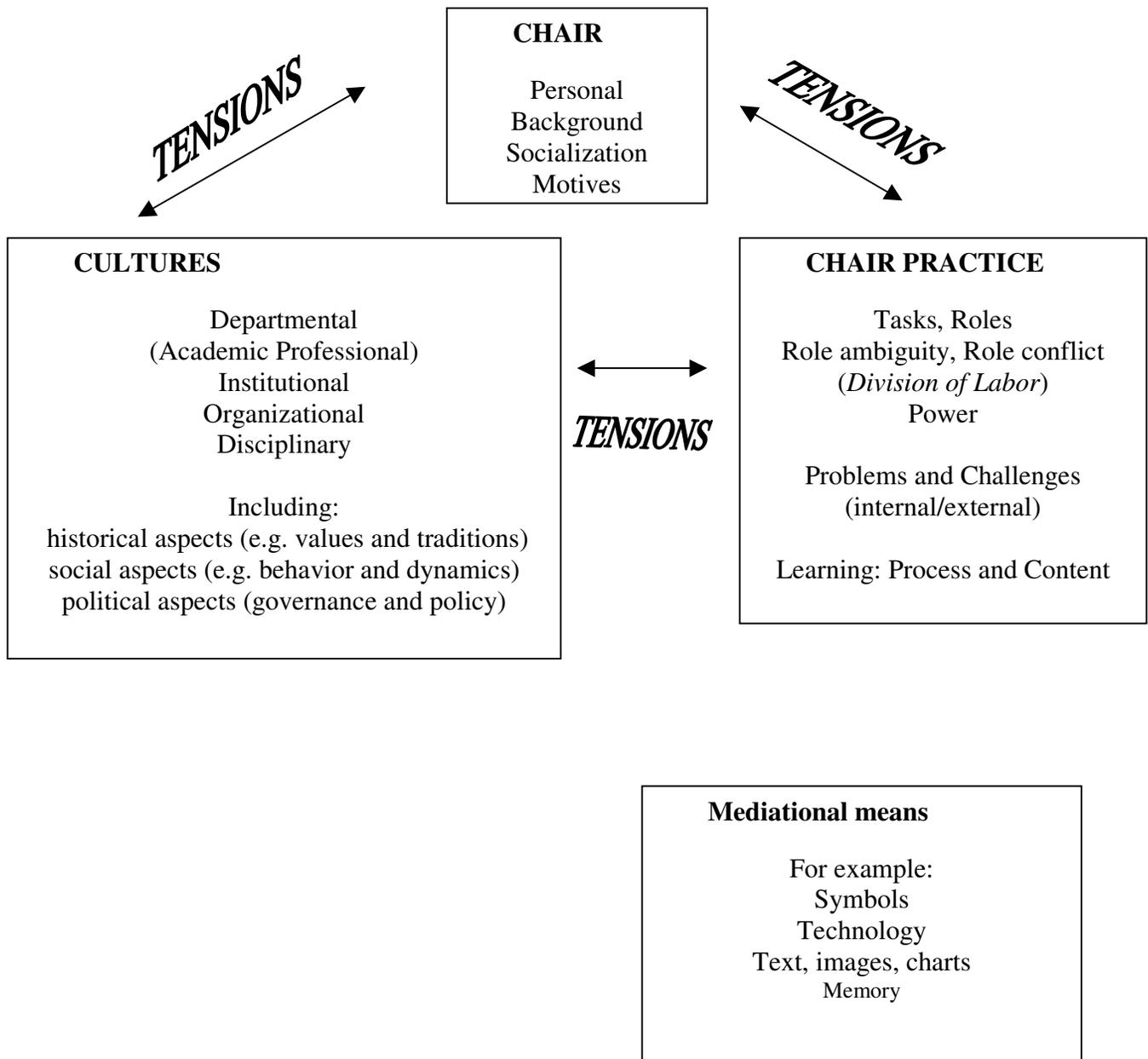
process (Lorenz, 2001, p. 321, 322) in which the individual in-social-activity coordinates the mediating artifact with the task environment (Lorenz, 2001, p. 322; Wertsch, 1995, p. 64). Thus, knowledge is constructed locally. However, and here I agree with activity theorists such as Engeström, not independent of more macro cultural, historical, and cultural systems and norms.

Mediational means can refer to cultural artifacts such as tools, signs, and symbols, but also to instruments (e.g. paper, pencil, computer), physical objects (e.g. a chair, table, coffeemachine), spaces (e.g. hallway, restaurant, elevator), technology (e.g. network, software), or external symbolic representations in the form of texts (e.g. handbooks, guidelines, and policies), images, or charts (Hutchins, 1995). Other examples of mediational means are the “cognitive structure” of a mind (Lorenz, 2001, p. 320), the “memory of the person-acting” (Lave, 1988, p. 97-8), and activities themselves.

For this study, which will be based on data concerning meaning-making and actions of chairs collected in retrospect, some mediational means will be more relevant than others. First of all, for data collected in retrospect, “the memory of the person-acting” (Lave, 1988, p. 97-8) is very important. Secondly, I am very much interested in the way certain activities have structured the activities that chronologically followed them and re-structured or transformed the activities that preceded them. For example, a particular act (decision) can exclude or constrain some other act. Thirdly, using document analysis I will also focus on external symbolic representations in the form of texts (e.g. handbooks, guidelines, and policies) and their structuring influence on actions. As I will not be involved in participant observation of actions in real time mediational means such as instruments, objects, and spaces are less relevant as the person ‘who is doing the remembering’ will probably be less likely inclined to remember or reconstruct, for example, the spatial domain in which the action took place.

**FIGURE 2**

**“WORKING MODEL” OF SOCIAL PRACTICE FOR CHAIRS**



# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## Introduction

In this section of the paper, I will focus briefly on the main aspects or phases of the research design of this study. I discuss my choice for an interpretive paradigm and perspective, the strategy of inquiry, the methods for data collection and analysis, and a limitation for the credibility of this research. As the reader will notice below I, as the researcher, believe strongly in an interpretive and constructivist world. Therefore, it should be no surprise that I agree with Denzin and Lincoln that the “biographically situated researcher” is the architect behind and subject of each of the phases of the research design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). To show the complex and recursive network of influences,

This individual [the researcher] enters the research process from inside an interpretive community. This community has its own historical research traditions, which constitute a distinct point of view. This perspective leads the researcher to adopt particular views of the ‘other’ who is studied. At the same time, the politics and the ethics of research must also be considered, for these concerns permeate every phase of the research process.” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 30).

We should not forget, though, that apart from the “biographically situated researcher” another criterion should drive the design of a study, namely the specific research questions. Let me thus start the discussion of the research design by restating the research questions. The questions are:

- How do chairs learn by handling new or unique problems/challenges in situ (daily life)?
- Which strategies, methods, and resources do they use? And, why?

## Paradigm of this study

This research proposal is founded on a social constructivist framework. Social constructivism, with a heritage in phenomenology (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Schutz, 1967), is developed, among others, by Gergen (1985; 1991), Searle (1995), and Von Glaserfeld (1991). Phenomenology focuses on descriptions of situations, events and actions as experienced by subjects (Polkinghorne, 1989). Social constructivists extend this by claiming that the meaning attributed to these experiences are constructed in social interactions through historical, political, cultural, and linguistic practices, conventions, and discourses, “not in the meaning-making activity of the individual mind” (Schwandt, 1998, p. 240) that operate in individuals’ lives (Creswell, 2003, p. 8). As a result of this creative process knowledge consists of pluralistic, multiple, constructed, and holistic realities.

I do believe that this paradigm fits very well with my study as the epistemological and ontological assumptions underlying this paradigm and those underlying the framework I use (social practice) are rather similar. Social practice assumes that knowing and doing “are open-ended processes of improvisation with the social, material, and experiential resources at hand” (p. 13). Moreover, social practice claims “that persons acting and the social world of activity cannot be separated” (Lave, 1993, p. 4-5). Thus, it is not the individual who makes meaning and acts on this meaning-making (which in this framework is equal to ‘learning’) but the person-in-activity. As social practice theorists believe that acting/learning varies depending on the agent and context

it follows, therefore, that multiple realities exist, at the intersection of which stands the person-in-activity (Lave, 1988, p. 97-8).

### **Strategy of inquiry**

The strategy of inquiry for this study is grounded theory, more in particular constructivist grounded theory. I will first briefly discuss grounded theory in general before approaching constructivist grounded theory.

The concepts undergirding grounded theory originated from Glaser and Strauss' revolutionary work *The discovery of grounded theory* (1967), which is considered a manifesto for qualitative research (Charmaz, 2003, p. 253). This work challenged several critiques from quantitative researchers who claimed qualitative work, among other work, to be unsystematic and not sufficiently theory-bounded. Glaser and Strauss' work 'answered' this critique by way of providing "guidelines for systematic data analysis with explicit analytic procedures and research strategies", a method that would not test but generate theory (Charmaz, 2003, p. 253).

In essence, grounded theory is a methodology through which the researcher systematically builds his knowledge or understanding from the ground up ('inductively') from the observed data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As this knowledge is grounded in the cases, (that is, the subjects and the events), knowledge from grounded theory is contextual. Nonetheless, the goal of grounded theory is to create "middle-range theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 250).

Within grounded theory we cannot linearly distinguish between the processes of collecting and analyzing data, as grounded theory is an iterative process of going back and forth between collected data, interpretations of these data (e.g. in the form of coding), and new data collection in order to refine analyses, a process that is called constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2003, p. 250). As such, grounded theory is not specific about data collection methods but it does specify strategies to be used for analysis (p. 251).

Grounded theory, as it originated from Glaser and Strauss' 1967 work and developed in separate and conflicting directions in the works of Glaser (e.g. 1992) and the works of Strauss (e.g. 1990), has been criticized by postmodernists and poststructuralists because of its assumptions of an objective, external reality, a neutral observer who discovers data, reductionist inquiry of manageable research problems, and objectivist rendering of data (Charmaz, 2003, p. 250).

Above all, it is believed that 'objectivistic' grounded theory separates "the experience from the experiencing subject, the meaning from the story, and the viewer from the viewed" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 269).

In reaction to this critique, researchers have tried to move away from the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying positivistic grounded theory. One of the directions taken is that of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 1995, 2003). Constructivist grounded theory is intended to 'improve' or complement (Charmaz, 2003, p. 256) grounded theory by applying to it constructivist assumptions, that is, a belief in multiple realities, mutual creation of knowledge by researcher and subject, and a focus on understanding individuals' experiences and meaning making (Charmaz, 2003, p. 250). As a result of this shift in grounded theory, data collection, data analysis, and writing have received different meaning (p. 258).

Constructivist grounded theory is, in my opinion, a good strategy of inquiry for my study. Constructivist grounded theory generates theory that shows its flexibility when applied to daily practice as it allows for change in human behavior and conditions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 237-245). As such the theory is never 'done' as it is in "a continual process of reformulation and

development as it is applied” by the person in practice (p. 244). From what we know about social practice theorists, this belief in open-ended processes between theory and practice is something that they should be able to underwrite.

### **Data Collection and Data analysis**

Types of data to be collected:

Grounded theorists collect data in the field. As such they use ethnographic methods, predominantly interviews. However, grounded theorists do not immerse themselves completely in the culture and community of a specific group; thus, they are not ethnographers in a strict sense (Crowson, 1993).

In addition, if necessary, I will collect and analyze relevant documents that might clarify information gathered in the interviews about the chairs’ problems. To conduct the interviews I have developed a set of questions which form the basis of semi-structured open-ended interviews.

Site:

This empirical study focuses on several chairpersons from one college at a Midwestern University in the U.S. Rationale for the choice of this university is the advantage of having been a relative insider in this community, one of the main characteristics of a study based on ethnographic methods (Fetterman, 1989, p. 30). This study of chairs is sensitive in nature as it concerns situations that chairs define as problematic or challenging, perhaps critical. To secure access to this information, it is necessary to be able to show the subjects one’s familiarity and knowledge of the institution, its culture, and its politics. In addition, I will have the advantage of currently no longer being associated with the administrative side of this university, which hopefully offers me, as said above, the right balance between being an insider (emic) and outsider (etic) in the community of study, which is important for the trustworthiness or credibility of the research results.

Subjects:

In my choice of chairs to be studied, I will use a purposeful sample method. First of all, I will limit myself to four or five chairs. This is not a quantitative study, which often requires a large sample as its goal is to explain and predict (Creswell, 2003, p. 185). Nor am I looking for a random sample from the MSU chair population as, in my opinion, this severely limits the outcomes of this study. As this study involves multiple interviews of individual chairs on a difficult/sensitive topic (their experience of challenges or problems and the actions that follow from this) I will above all need chairs that are (a) willing to be intensively interviewed on this topic; and, (b) able to articulate and reflect on their actions and motivations in retrospect.

Furthermore, as disciplinary differences are important variables for the behavior of chairs (see the section on cultures), my sample of chairs needs to include chairs from different disciplines. However, if I would take chairs at random, there would be too many variables of diversity to take into account, for example, in terms of racial, ethnic, and gender characteristics. Thus, to keep the diversity of the sample I have to deal with somewhat within limits, my sample will consist of chairs from different but similar disciplines within one college, the College of Natural Sciences. As these chairs are all men, this also deals with gender diversity as a complicating factor in this study.

Finally, I would like to propose to limit the variability in another way. As said before, chairs also vary in the number of years of experience they have. This experience might influence what kind of problems or challenges the chair addresses and how. Nonetheless, especially first-

year chairs are often overwhelmed by personal and professional problems that have to do with the new tasks they are asked to perform and their transition from faculty member to chair. To minimize the risk of chairs focusing too much on these transitional issues, I will interview chairs that have had at least one year of experience, and thus have experienced a complete academic cycle. It will probably be easier for these chairs to reflect about their job and actions than for beginning chairs.

#### Focus of study:

The goal of this study is to answer the research questions (how do chairs learn by handling new problems) by way of looking at how chairs act on their meaning/perception of the world. In this study, I make the assumption that the chair has constructed his/her perception of the world in (social) interactions with that world. One of the intermediate parts of the analysis is constructing, as completely as possible, the basic social practice model (see Figure 1) with the chair as agent, the chair's work and the context in which he/she practices, hereby using the information given by the chair and information gained through document analysis.

The object of study are the dialectical relationship between the elements of the basic model, applied to chairs, on the one hand and the chair's problems and actions to solve the problems on the other; in other words, how do chair, chair's practice, context, problems, and actions inform one another. The focus is on actions of pragmatic choice in the handling or solving problems. I am not interested in the successfulness of the chosen actions nor in the outcomes, but in the chair's perceptions of problems or challenges, the strategies and reasoning behind actions, and the chair's perspective on learning in the whole process. My focus on pragmatic chosen actions and my assumption of sensemaking as an action "in retrospect" (Weick, 1995), warrant my choice of interviewing chairs also in retrospect of their problems and problemsolving. As such the interview itself will function as a reflective, constructive act of meaning-making and learning.

#### **Limitation**

This study's most clear limitation is that I will not immerse myself in the life world of chairs nor observe chairs in action. How can I explain this? As said before, I will look at how people act on their perception of the world. As the literature on sense-making made clear, concepts of actions are difficult to define as we can only speak of actions, with a beginning and an end, in retrospect (Weick, 1995). In retrospect we make meaning out of what we did, ignoring whether it was a conscious act or just coincidental. "The creation of meaning is an attention process, but it is attention to that which has already occurred" (Weick, 1995, p. 25-6). Whether this 'remembered' action, or as Lave phrases it "the memory of the person-acting" (Lave, 1988, p. 97-8), corresponds with a real action in the world (e.g. espoused theory, Argyris, 1978) is in this study irrelevant because only the 'remembered' action will influence actions in the future, i.e. what is 'learned'.

Nonetheless, in the future I do hope to extend this research on chairs as I consider this study to be the first phase in a multiple-stage research process. The outcomes of this study should then inform the multiple case studies of the second phase in which I observe chairs actually handling problems in real-time as part of their practice.

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