

Understanding the Head of Department Role: Leading Design and Technology

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Background

- This paper is part of my doctoral research that explores the perceptions of subject leaders about their practices.
- The research focuses on heads of Design and Technology departments in secondary schools for 11-18-year-old pupils.
- The research was conducted in secondary schools in London.

Purpose of the research

- The purpose of this research is to understand the perceptions of Design and Technology heads of departments about their practice in monitoring teaching and learning in their departments.
- This research is relevant to
 - Practising heads of departments
 - Aspiring heads of departments
 - Teachers of Design and Technology
 - Design and Technology research community

Methodology

- This study's design combined the **CHAT (Cultural Historical Activity Theory)** framework as a lens to view data and a **multiple case study**, which allowed the understanding of practice in natural settings (Yin, 2009).
- The six participants were purposively selected.
- **Research question:** How are tools used and appropriated by heads of departments in Design and Technology department leadership activity systems?
- Field visits were used for data collection.
- Data was collected through
 - Semi-structured interviews with heads of departments.
 - Taking of field notes (about the settings of the department: department tea-room/office, department corridors, displays around the departments).
 - Documents such as minutes of department meetings, learning walks proformas, work scrutiny records, lesson observation records and schedules and computer room booking spreadsheets.

Methodology

Table 1. A summary of fieldwork from six heads of departments (HoD1, HoD2, HoD3, HoD4, HoD5 and HoD6)

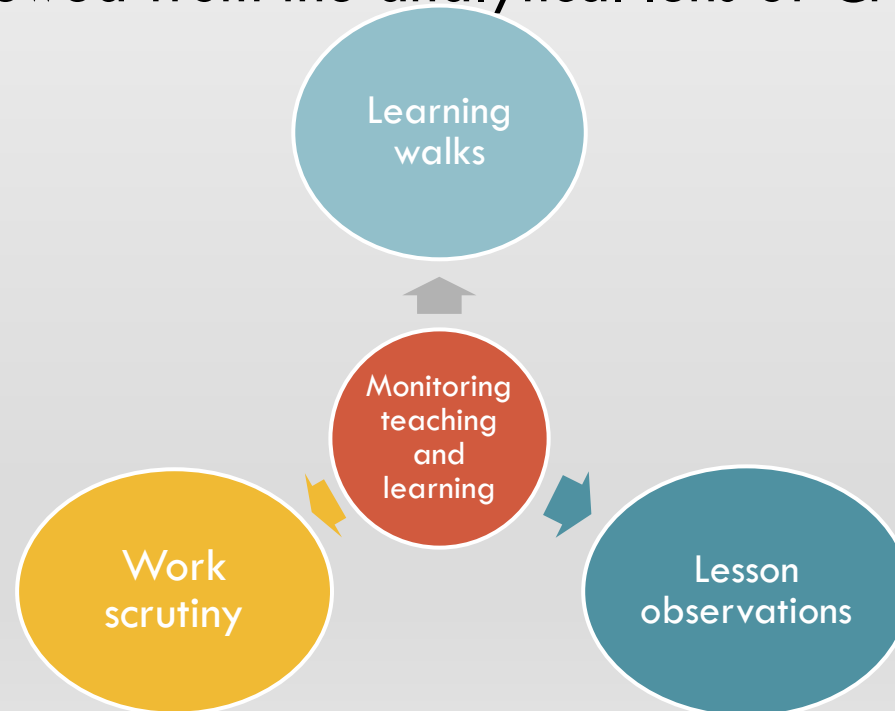
<u>Type of fieldwork</u>	HoD <u>1</u>	HoD <u>2</u>	= HoD3	HoD <u>4</u>	HoD <u>5</u>	HoD <u>6</u>
Field visits	1	2	2	1	1	2
Interviews	1	2	2	1	1	2
Duration of interview 1 (in minutes)	65	42	38	43	33	25
Duration of interview 2 (in minutes)	n/a	29	28	n/a	n/a	20
Count of documents shared by the subject leader	2	3	2	4	5	0
Collection of information on Design and Technology department from the schools' website	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Field notes on department classroom walls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Field notes on display boards on the school corridors.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Field notes on department tearoom/office	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Data analysis

- Following the initial coding and categorising items the research data were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).
- The data was further viewed from the analytical lens of CHAT (Engeström, 1987; 1999; 2001) which provided a stronger theoretical input than would be possible using thematic analysis alone (Douglas, 2015).
- The design was a systematic way of understanding leadership practice and CHAT helped to explain why the leadership of these departments was the way it was.

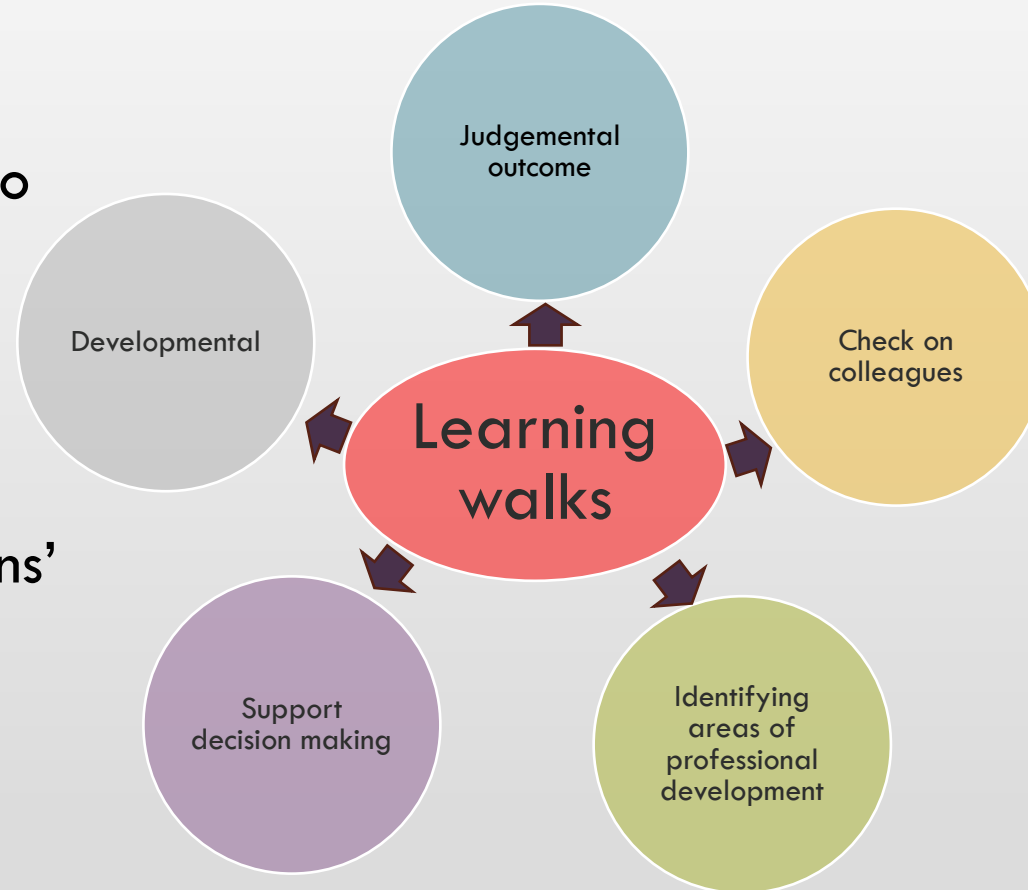
Results

- Participants identified ways that they use to monitor teaching and learning in Design and Technology.
- These were later viewed from the analytical lens of CHAT.



Results

- Learning walks also referred to as
 - walkthroughs
 - informal walks
 - lesson visits
 - ‘pop into lessons’

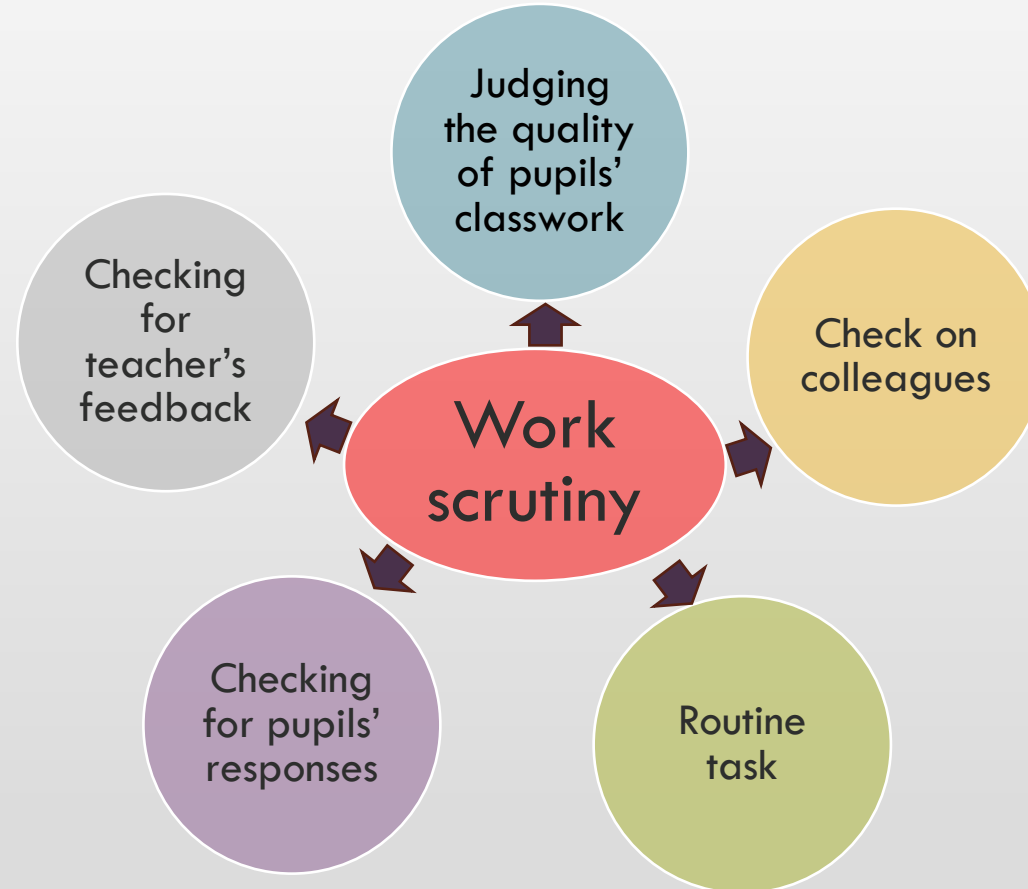


‘I just walk in and pretend I am making tea’ (HoD2, interview 1)

‘I am looking to pick up weaknesses and work out strategies to improve those’ (HoD1, interview)

Results

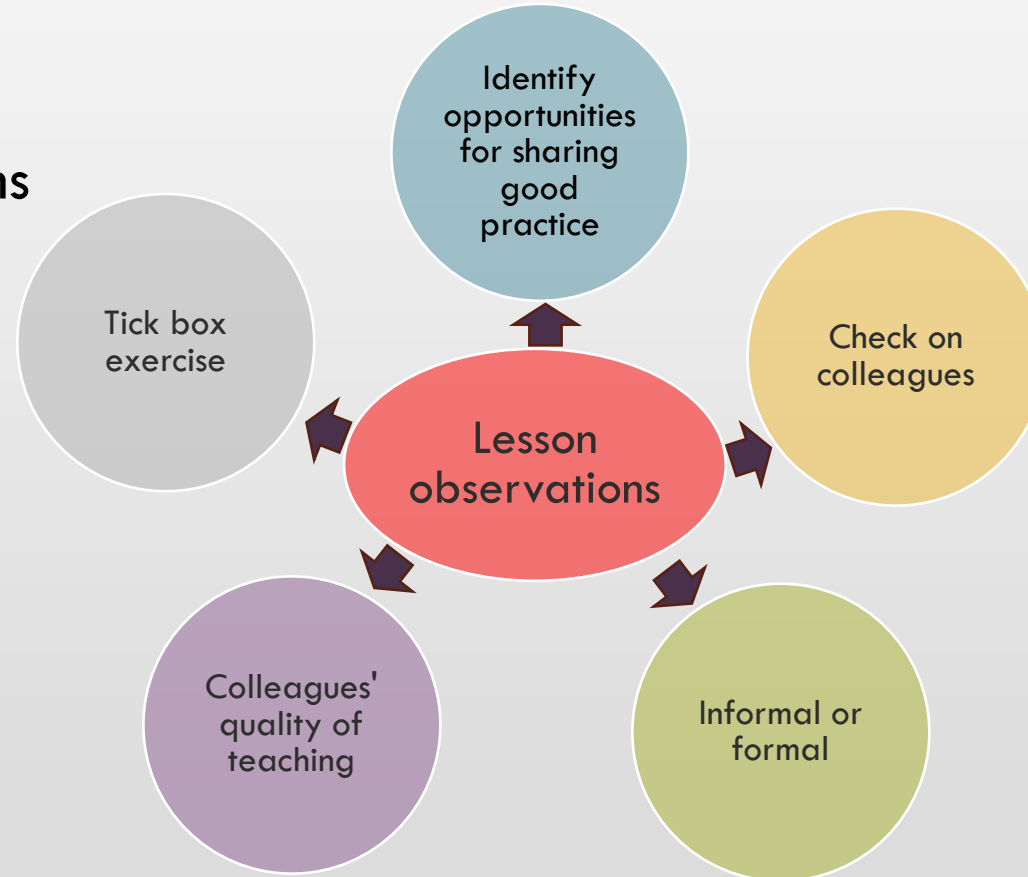
- Work scrutiny also referred to as
 - book looks
 - book review
 - book check



...on-going things like...book check...we share books...just to see what is going on and to see what feedback that has been given (HoD1, interview)

Results

- Lesson observations



‘observations, I do it once a term...I know how they teach’ (HoD2, interview 1)

Discussion

- The research applies **CHAT concepts** in discussing subject leaders' tools and considers how they were appropriated by the participants in the Design and Technology department leadership activity system to achieve an object, thus transforming it into an outcome (Kuutti, 1996).
- **Tools** or **artifacts** mediate subject's work on the object (Lee, 2011).
- Each **participant** perceived and **took up tools** according to **their importance to the object of the activity**.
- This **take-up of tools leads to creating a possible relationship between the object of the activity system and how the tools are used**.

Discussion – CHAT concepts

The **subject** constructs the **object** (*the object of an activity is its true motive*) of an identified activity, for example the activity of developing Design and Technology in the secondary school curriculum. There are other activities in a Design and Technology department leadership activity system such as working with parents.

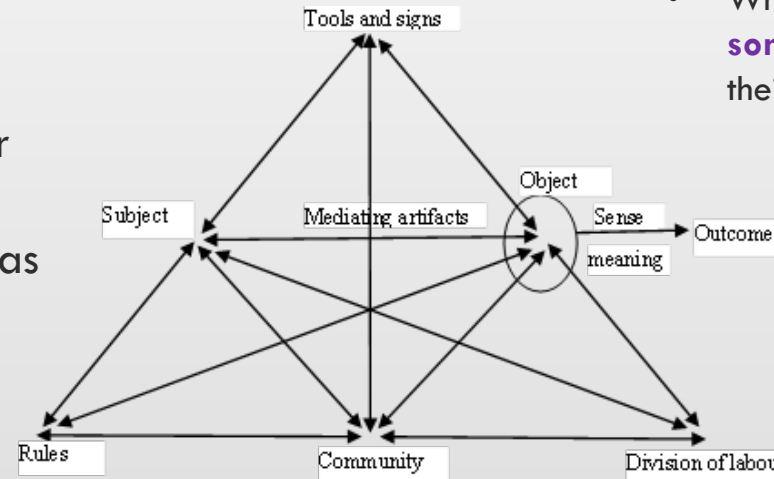


Figure 1: The structure of a human activity system (Engeström, 2001: 135)

A **Design and Technology department leadership activity** system is created from the perspective of the head of department working in it, others in the department, pupils, parents, and the school community

- **Tools** can be classified either as **material** (practical) or **conceptual** (Foot, 2014). Material tools are tangible and could include learning walks, proformas and computer systems used to analyse pupils' data.
- **Conceptual tools** could include a head of department's knowledge in a Design and Technology specialist subject.
- When a **tool is adopted in an activity system** it **reveals something** about the relationship between the subject and their object at the point at which the tool was appropriated.

- An activity occurs through a process that changes the **subject**, the **object**, and the connection between them.
- **Tool appropriation** is the process of adopting a tool when working on an object (Douglas, 2012).
- This means that when the subject adopts a tool to use, the **tool specifies the way the subject carries out the action**.

Discussion

- Where heads of departments were seen to work with the staff to improve collective classroom practice; for example, on the quality of teaching and learning in their departments, tools were appropriated for sustaining and developing the work of their Design and Technology departments rather than for monitoring and accountability.
- The tool that is the book checks (work scrutiny) was appropriated in multiple ways relating to teaching and learning.

HOD1

- HoD1's book checks were used in a way that was specific to the professional development needs of the department staff.
- HoD1 appeared to **reject the book check tool** as presented by the school's senior leaders.
- HoD1 saw book checks **as a way of sharing good practice** rather than a tick-box exercise to check conformity.
- By appropriating the tool this way, HoD1 creates an **opportunity for the sustaining and developing the department**.
- Therefore, the **book check tool enabled mediation of the department's** work through the head of department.

HOD2

- HoD2 saw the purpose of book-looks as that of **checking conformity**.
- HoD2 resisted using book-looks and viewed them as **formal, procedural** and an **unnecessarily inspecting the work of teachers**.
- HoD2 frustration at the lack of flexibility, the numerous occurrences and the approach used in carrying out book-looks could imply that HoD2 saw the **book-looks tool as limiting her work in the department rather** than as a way **of improving the work of the department**.

Conclusion

- The **leadership perceptions** that emerged from the interviews with heads of departments **were** both **complex** and **distinctive in their contextual settings**.
- Heads of departments' view of the object varied depending on the **department contexts** thus the **tools were appropriated differently**.
- The view of the object was different for heads of departments who appropriated tools to monitor and supervise the work of teachers in the department. For example, the tools in such departments were **appropriated in a restrictive way**; to check compliance and monitor the work of teachers.
- When appropriated as such, the **tools were restrictive in that they acted as rules** rather than being used in a **developmental way** in the activity systems; this is because they were appropriated in a regulatory way (Douglas, 2015).
- A CHAT analysis of qualitative data has been helpful in gaining an understanding of leadership opportunities in the unique contexts of secondary school Design and Technology departments.
- Employing CHAT as a lens to view the data enabled an understanding of the different leadership practices that unfold in the social contexts of subject departments.

Further research

- Understand how tools are appropriated differently or similarly in Design and Technology departments compared to other departments.
- A study that could capture what subject leaders are doing would be more suitable rather than analysing what they say they are doing.

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