A Critical Analysis of Structural Contradictions in Open and Distance Higher Education Using Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

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Abstract: Drawing upon cultural-historical activity theory, this research analyzed the structural contradictions existing in a variety of educational activities among a group of alienated adult students in open and distance higher education.

Introduction

Globally, technological development has resulted in the increased number of mega-universities built upon the principle of open and distance education (Bates, 1997). Open and distance higher education institutions generally have a long-standing commitment to extend adults higher education. In this global movement of open and distance higher education, Korea National Open University (KNOU) has enabled many Korean citizens to participate in higher education both flexibly and conveniently (KNOU, 2011; Yoon, 2006). While only about 10,000 students attended KNOU in 1972, over 170,000 enrolled in 2010. Moreover, 508,835 people had graduated from the institution as of 2010 (KNOU, 2011). However, despite the positive impact of KNOU on the extension of higher education opportunity (Lee, 2001), KNOU education has varying meanings and values for different individual adult students. As KNOU has developed in the specific socio-cultural circumstances of South Korea, the variety of meanings and values of KNOU as a national open and distance higher education institution has impacted not only individual learners' motivations but also the Korean culture of higher education.

Korea, like many other Asian countries, is notorious for being a credential-oriented society, which highly values the final educational degree of a person, as opposed to a meritocracy (Choi, 2009). Korean scholars have argued that one's place within the Korean social structure is heavily influenced by academic credentials, or, in other words, so-called *credentialism* (Choi, 2009; Kim, 2004). Such social and cultural views regarding higher education exacerbate the social discrimination and prejudice toward people with lower educational degrees including adult learners in distance higher education (Kim, 2004). In this social context, participation in the inexpensive and open education of KNOU, as opposed to traditional higher education, is less valued in society. The social bias and other negative aspects of KNOU education can be embodied in KNOU students' experience of contradictions in open and distance higher education. This study aims to illuminate the origins, patterns, and features of contradictions experienced by alienated KNOU students.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was informed by two theories: the theory of alienation and cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). First, the target student group selected for the research was defined as alienated distance adult learners who could not continue their education due to socio-cultural barriers in school and the society. Marx was "the first theorist to link alienation explicitly to human productive activity" (Sidorkin, 2004, p. 252). Marx (1975) defines alienation as the phenomenon of becoming foreign to the world people live in, claiming

that humans create both material and social products and conversely are made by them. The concept of alienation drew considerable attention among Western sociologists and socio-psychologists from the middle of the twentieth century (Williamson & Cullingford, 1997). The expanded usage of the term is grounded in interdisciplinary facets of the philosophical meaning of alienation. Even though Marx did not explicitly address education, his philosophical underpinnings in regards to alienation have great implications for education (Sidorkin, 2004).

Second, CHAT is employed as a means to examine the contradictions of KNOU education and attendant participants' experiences while engaging in their KNOU educations. Engeström (1987, 2001), one of the most influential contemporary CHAT scholars, has significantly contributed to the contemporary development of activity theory, articulating the methodological usefulness of the theory. Engeström (1987) developed the notion of activity system by combining the system's theoretical principles with CHAT. Starting from the Vygotskyan concept of subject-object relation mediated by tools or instruments, the activity system model includes communities, rules, and the continuously negotiated distribution of tasks, powers, and responsibilities among the components of the system (see Figure 1). Therefore, the idea of the activity system incorporates these societal and contextual factors influencing and encompassing human activity into the basic model of Vygotsky (Engeström, 2001). More importantly, activity systems are built upon the basis of constant internal and external contradictions (Daniels, 2004; Engeström, 2001). It is important to note that contradictions be differentiated from mere problems or disorienting dilemmas from the subject-only perspective. Rather, they exist in human activities because each of their constituents has structural conditions that result from tensions.

Research Methods

Critical ethnography is the key methodological approach of this study (Carspecken, 1996). Given the fact that Korean society and KNOU as social and cultural institutions impose distinct forms of learning, curricula, and pedagogy, an ethnographic approach can provide insights into how the group of KNOU students experienced the preset educational structure of KNOU and realized contradictions. The emphasis of this ethnographic investigation was on critically finding not just individual, subjective responses to the preset problem, but on the dominant culture that defines the KNOU students' identity and their abilities to critically recognize the social, structural, and political systems. The research was conducted at KNOU from early May in 2011 for approximately three months in the meetings with selected adult learner groups and individuals. It includes 26 individual interviews, two focus group interviews, and three observations. In both individual and focus group interviews, the participants were asked to describe their experiences KNOU education as well as their pre-institutional experiences of alienation in education and at work. Three observations were intended to capture implicit aspects of contradictions in KNOU in the participants' interactions and conversations. The research also involved a review of documents indicating the evidence of alienation, discrimination, and inequality in Korean education and society. Furthermore, textual materials that inform problems of KNOU's distance higher education were the target of document analysis.

A purposeful sampling was designed to find KNOU students representing social and cultural alienation in terms of higher education. Specific groups and individuals were selected from identified KNOU students who had failed to become traditional college students when they were young. Research participants were among those who had no higher education experience

other than their current KNOU participation. Additionally, the research limited participants to students who had at least two years of working experience after high (or lower level) school graduation, as it considered that their social experiences with lower credentials have shaped their identities and ways of thinking of life (Collins, 1979). Once all the data was put in NVivo 9, the entire interview transcripts, field notes, and other textual materials were quickly scanned for the purpose of grasping overall themes and organizations of the descriptions. After the data set was realigned with the two overarching phenomena (i.e., alienation and contradiction), an intensive analysis of the entire data set followed. The final analytical phase was to elicit and refine the final themes in the dialectical process of exhaustively reviewing the descriptions pointed to by the emergent codes and categories. In particular, when revisiting the participants' institutional experiences of KNOU education, the key elements (subject, object, mediation, community, division of labor, and rule) of the activity system in CHAT were considered.

Findings

General Activity System of KNOU Students

The general activity system of KNOU students is represented by Figure 1 below. The community in this activity system is comprised of KNOU students and staff/faculty members. They share distance higher education at KNOU as their common objective. This community is conceptually distinguished from communities of other higher educational institutions and/or other social groups in Korea, as well as different open and distance higher education institutions worldwide. This triangular activity system represents the interplay of complex elements that constitutes the activity of KNOU education. Although diverse individuals and groups must perform different actions and operations within this central activity system, the KNOU students are the subject group for this central activity system.
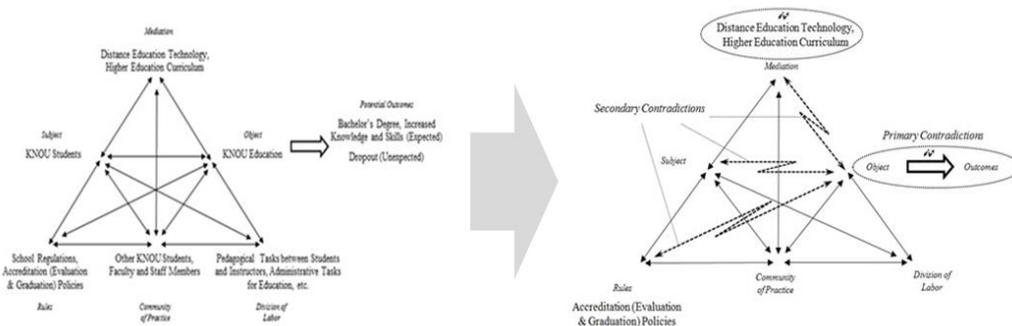

Figure 1. The general activity system of KNOU education and inner-contradictions

It is important to note that this model is conceptualized to describe the students' activity during their KNOU education in general. As the participants had been alienated from the mainstream educational system, their agency as distance learners previously alienated was considered the main perspective from which I revisited this general activity system. Their experiences of social discrimination and inequality due to their low academic credentials led to convergent motivations to attend KNOU and shaped their perspectives on the value of higher education. The participants' perspectives provide a directional force whereby their specific activity systems and attendant actions are understood. The participants' experiences of the KNOU education system are categorized into three overarching concepts: assessment,

curriculum, and technology. These educational elements are regarded as the sub-activity systems of a KNOU education.

Multiple Levels of Contradiction

Within each sub-activity system, the participants faced various problems of KNOU education (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Problems of KNOU education perceived by the participants

Activity system	Recognized problems		Activity system	Recognized problems	
Technology-learning activity system	Ineffective online lectures	• The amount of knowledge delivered efficiently through technology • Monotonous online lectures: missing informal, face-to-face teaching-learning processes	Curriculum-understanding activity system	Overly theoretical curriculum	• Useless textbook knowledge • The overly used academic language • Knowledge unmatched with students worldview and experience
	Limited communication	• One-way communication of technology-based instructions • Asynchronous mode of KNOU instruction: missing immediate communication		Too practical curriculum	• Decreased number of liberal art, humanity-related, and cultural study subjects • Pragmatic-outcome-orientation
	Lack of interaction	• Unrealized identity as college students: Missing sense of belonging • Difficult to develop intimate relationships among students and between instructors and students	Evaluation activity system	Individual factors	• Low self-confidence • Conflict in learning schedule
				Organizational factors	• Efficiency-oriented, bureaucratic settings of evaluation • Misleading questions in examinations and assignment • Inappropriate difficulty-level of examinations • Misguiding examination structure: mid-term and final distribution, grading policy, etc. • Tight examination schedule • Indoctrination

Even though these problems were straightforward in the data analysis, structural contradictions of KNOU education that resulted in those recognizable problems were not fully comprehensible in each individual's statements. Thus, in order to identify the structural contradictions as well as the origins of the KNOU students' negative perceptions, it is necessary to further discuss the multi-level structural contradictions existing in/between the identified activity systems within the CHAT framework (see Figure 1).

Primary contradictions are rooted in each node of the activity system. The research findings specifically indicate that the object and the mediations of the central activity system involve an explicit form of contradictions as experienced by the participants. A primary contradiction embedded in the object arises between the dual principles of KNOU education (i.e., efficiency-oriented open and mass education vs. quality higher education). There are also primary contradictions within the mediations. For example, KNOU students realized that the technology-driven KNOU system failed to accommodate their need to have immediate communications and intimate relationships between KNOU community members. H stated:

> Given the mass education of KNOU, I know it is not easy to respond quickly to every student's questions... I don't think we should just study what is given to us, take exams, get grades, and graduate. This is not a certification program. Higher education should be better than this.

In a similar vein, while the curriculum containing subject knowledge in regards to the topics of the course can be viewed as the course contents to enhance students' learning, the overly theoretical/practical curriculum did not meet the students' need for learning knowledge and skills relevant to their lives and careers. Y stated:

> Now I know the curriculum does not match to my previous motivation to study in KNOU. I thought I would learn and practice the Chinese language, but the majority of the curriculum consists of literature. There are also many areas of cultural studies to be completed, especially during the first and second years. I ask myself, 'Should I learn this kind of subjects in my old age?' and 'How am I going to use this kind of knowledge?'

Secondary contradictions occur in the conflicting relationship between two of the nodes in an activity system. In this research, three types of contradictions were identified at the secondary level. First, the research findings illuminate a contradiction rooted in the relationship between the subject and the object of the general activity system. The participants' ambivalent perspectives on the KNOU education were intensified from the contradictory relationship between these two elements. While alienation in the educational system and in society motivated students to attend KNOU, their alienation was not sufficiently addressed by the open and mass education of KNOU. The contradictions confronted by the participants who need to complete a higher educational degree as well as to gain useful knowledge and skills for their careers was exacerbated in this particular Korean socio-cultural context where high academic credentials are admired. Second, given the commodity form of distance higher education, another secondary inner-contradiction arises when the rule of KNOU education collided with the object. In the school's evaluation system, more sophisticated ways of evaluation to assure quality higher education are hampered by the efficient and top-down educational model of open and mass distance higher education. By this structural contradiction, students' learning was limited to practicing just superficial and memorization-centered knowledge. For example,

> I think our KNOU education should lead to our in-depth understanding of subject knowledge. But our examination system is not sufficient to fulfill that commitment. We don't have to, or cannot, deeply go into the knowledge to get ready for multiple-choice final exams… The KNOU evaluation system asks for simple, pre-set answers. (B's individual interview)

Third, another secondary contradiction can be conceptualized in the dialectical relation between the mediations and the object of the central activity system. As the participants were given the institutionally preset pedagogical technology and curriculum, the primary contradictions existing in those two mediations of the central activity system became problematic because they collided with the primary contradiction rooted in the object. If the participants learned merely practical knowledge and skills, then that may undermine the original mission of KNOU as a national institution of higher education. On the other hand, if they had learned overly theoretical knowledge, that mitigates adult learners' satisfaction and misguides their preparation for advanced careers. This ambivalent aspect of the students' experiences and perspectives of the KNOU curriculum were also articulated in M's individual interview as below.

> It doesn't seem like college education. When I was taking final exams [multiple-choice exams], I thought that this is almost like high school education. I usually prepared the exams hastily. Sometimes I asked myself 'Isn't this too easy to be higher education?'

Identifying the secondary contradictions permitted to elucidate the socio-cultural and structural characteristics of contradictions. That is, analyzing socio-cultural factors made the contradictions surface, which allowed me to re-conceptualize this phenomenon among the alienated KNOU students in more comprehensive and sophisticated ways.

A tertiary contradiction among the participants arose when the participants looked to resolve the secondary contradictions. For instance, when they realized that the impersonal KNOU approach did not fulfill their expectations, they searched for extra-curricular activities such as organizing study groups in order to supplement their unmet educational needs. Through this activity, they pursued the sense of belonging as a member of higher education and the bond formed through actual, not virtual, interactions with one another. This new way of learning through extra-curricular activities among the alienated students is an outcome of the internal contradictions rooted in the general activity.

Conclusion & Implications

231

KNOU's quantitative development in student number is attributed to the administratively optimized and efficiently operating education system of KNOU. However, the alienated students' critical reflections of their learning experience in KNOU shed light on how the top-down, bureaucratic pedagogical system collided with individual learners' expectations and needs. This shows that an efficiency-oriented model of distance higher education for broader adult populations may inevitably entail a compromise between a competitive, quality curriculum and the efficient extension of audiences.

Given the contradictions in terms of the lack of variety in KNOU's pedagogical systems, which often collided with students' needs and lives, it is necessary to diversify the learning contents as well as the ways in which distance education courses are delivered to adult learners. It is also necessary to develop various spaces for active communication and interaction for distance adult learners' social presence which significantly influences their learning (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010). Lastly, the efficiency-driven evaluation system such as automated assessments or large-scale examinations should be reconsidered since it could mislead adult learning in the context of distance higher education.

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