

Knowles Teacher Initiative: Understanding Your System Through Activity System Framework (ASF)

Every educator works within multiple systems - classroom, department, school, district, committees. Unfortunately, sometimes those systems don't produce the outcomes we hope for. Maybe your PLC meetings feel unproductive and focus too much on logistics and not enough on student learning. Or maybe a new initiative that your committee designed isn't being taken up well. The Activity System Framework (ASF) can help you understand *why* that happens.

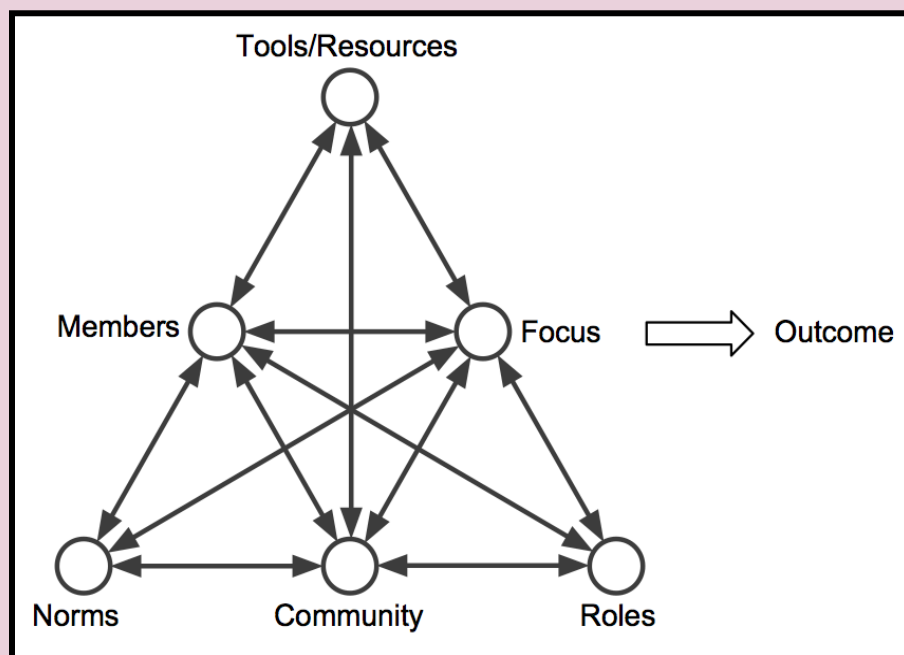
Grounded in [Cultural-Historical Activity Theory \(CHAT\)](#), the Activity System Framework, is an analytical model that can be used to understand human activity, specifically, how individuals, shaped by their contexts, use tools to achieve goals. Adapted for educational systems, Knowles' version of ASF helps educators examine the relationships among the seven elements that shape any system: members, community, focus, roles, norms, tools and resources, and outcomes. Each element influences the others, creating a web of interactions that defines how the system operates.

What's going on in your system?

Before you explore the framework, think of a system you're part of (presently or in the past) where the results are not ideal. Keep this system in mind as you study the diagram.

As you consider each part, use the guiding questions in the resource to identify and describe each element of the activity system, determine how power and privilege influence each element, and how each element interacts with other elements in the system. These questions are designed to help you understand what's happening in your context and what might be shaping those dynamics.

As you examine your system, look carefully for areas of alignment and tension. Where do expectations or practices conflict? In what ways might a shift in one element—like redefining norms, clarifying focus, or rethinking tools—create ripples of change across the system? These are your potential leverage points: small but powerful places to act with intention.



Members

These are the participants in your system - those who are directly involved in the activity. It is the individual or group whose perspective is the focus of the analysis (e.g., grade level team, teacher).

Describe

- Who is directly engaged in this work?
- Who am I in this system, and what responsibilities or expertise do I bring?
- Who are the other members, and how do we relate to one another?
- How are members' identities, experiences, and roles shaping participation?

Systems of Power & Professional Agency

- Who among us holds formal or informal authority or professional status? Who doesn't have a voice?
- Whose knowledge is treated as legitimate, and whose is discounted?

Interactions with Other System Elements

- **Member:** How do members experience tension between their espoused values and their actual participation or influence in this system?
- **Community:** How do members' identities and actions reflect or challenge the values and culture of the broader community?
- **Focus:** How do members' differing perspectives shape or complicate the shared focus of our work?
- **Roles:** How do members' expertise and identities influence the roles they are given or take up?
- **Norms:** How do members reinforce or push back against the group's explicit or implicit rules?
- **Tools/Resources:** How do members' differential access to tools/resources shape their participation and agency?
- **Outcomes:** How do members' identities and positions influence the outcomes the system produces (e.g., whose success is prioritized)?

Community

Describe

- What larger community does this activity sit within (school, district, families, professional networks)?

<p>The community is the larger social and institutional context that defines your activity system. It includes all individuals and groups who share the same general goal (e.g., staff, students, parents, district administration).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What values, expectations, and mandates does this community hold? About students and families? • Who is impacted by the work but is not directly a member? (e.g., students, families, admin) • Who are all the stakeholders in this work? <p><u>Systems of Power & Professional Agency</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are this community's beliefs about teacher value and agency? • What systems of privilege or oppression are evident in this community? <p><u>Interactions with Other System Elements</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members: How do community norms and expectations shape who becomes a member or how members participate? • Community: What contradictions exist between the community's expectations, values, and mandates? • Focus: How do community priorities, expectations or norms support/constrain the focus of this system? • Roles: How does the broader community's organization influence role assignments within the system? • Tools/Resources: How does the community determine which tools are available or valued? • Norms: How do community-wide rules and cultural expectations shape the norms of this group? • Outcomes: How do system outcomes reinforce or challenge the community's values and power structures?
<p>Focus</p> <p>The focus is the shared goal, purpose, or motive of the members' work. (e.g., developing a new grading policy, analyzing student data)</p>	<p><u>Describe</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the focus of our work - the problem, issue, or task that we're shaping? • To what extent does each member understand and agree on the focus? • Is the espoused goal what the group is actually working toward? Or is it something different? <p><u>Systems of Power & Professional Agency</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent are teacher voices included when the focus is defined? • Who sets the focus? Whose interests does the focus serve? <p><u>Interactions with Other System Elements</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members: How do members' perspectives and goals shape the focus of the work? • Community: How do community mandates or expectations influence what focus is prioritized? • Focus: What competing foci (e.g., student learning vs. test scores) create friction in this system? • Roles: How does the division of labor support or conflict with pursuing the focus? • Tools/Resources: How do the tools available enable or limit the work that members are trying to do? • Norms: How do rules/norms align with or undermine progress toward the focus? • Outcome: How do the current outcomes reflect or distort the original focus?
<p>Roles</p>	<p><u>Describe</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What roles and responsibilities do members have, formally and informally?

<p>This is the division of labor. It includes implicit and explicit organization of tasks, power, and responsibility within the members.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is responsible for what? Who has agency to do what? • Who has the power or authority to make decisions, set agendas, or shape direction? • Do members act in the roles they've been assigned (e.g., leader, facilitator), or differently? <p><u>Systems of Power & Professional Agency</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is allowed to express professional knowledge and act on it? • Whose knowledge is deemed legitimate or worthwhile? • How are these roles influenced by larger systems of privilege and power? <p><u>Interactions with Other System Elements</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members: How do members' identities and expertise shape the roles they are assigned or take on? • Community: How does the larger community's hierarchy influence internal roles? • Focus: How well does the division of work align with the focus of the work? • Roles: Where do tensions emerge between formal role descriptions and the informal roles members actually take up? • Tools/Resources: How do tools/resources shift or reinforce the distribution of work? • Norms: How do rules and norms reinforce or challenge existing role structures? • Outcome: How do the ways work is divided shape the results of the system?
<p>Tools/ Resources</p> <p>These are physical, digital, or intellectual resources members use to accomplish their goal. It includes time, funding, and physical space.</p>	<p><u>Describe</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What physical, intellectual, or digital tools and human resources do members use in the work? • What do the tools communicate about expectations for students and teachers? • What do our tools allow us to accomplish that we couldn't do otherwise? • What tools or resources are missing that we need? <p><u>Professional Agency & Power</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who controls access to tools and resources? • Do tools reflect inclusive, anti-oppressive practices or reinforce inequities? <p><u>Interactions with Other System Elements</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members: How does unequal access to tools/resources affect participation and agency? • Community: How does the larger community shape which tools are available or valued? • Focus: How do tools/resources support or constrain what members are trying to do? • Roles: How do tools reinforce or redistribute work in the system? • Tools/Resources: How do tools/resources simultaneously enable and constrain the work? • Norms: How do group rules shape which and how tools are used? • Outcome: How do tools/resources shape the results achieved?
<p>Norms</p>	<p><u>Describe</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What explicit and implicit rules guide how we work together? • How are norms created, maintained, and challenged?

<p>These are the implicit and explicit guidelines that govern how members interact and work together.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are we allowed to talk about? What are we not allowed to talk about (but may need to)? • How are conflicts handled and decisions reached? <p><u>Systems of Power & Professional Agency</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who defines and enforces norms? Are norms equally applied to and taken up by all members of the system? • Which cultural assumptions or systems of power are embedded in current norms? <p><u>Interactions with Other System Elements</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members: How do members reinforce or push back against the rules? • Community: How do broader cultural expectations shape the group's norms? • Focus: How do norms align or conflict with progress towards the focus of the system? • Roles: How do norms justify or constrain the distribution of work and authority? • Tools/Resources: Which tools are considered acceptable or unacceptable because of norms? • Norms: Where do formal rules conflict with informal norms and how do members navigate which to follow? • Outcomes: How do norms directly shape the kinds of results this system produces?
<p>Outcome</p> <p>The outcome is the result of the system. It is not the same thing as the focus but what actually happens as the system operates.</p>	<p><u>Describe</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What outcomes are emerging from this system, whether intended or unintended? • How do these outcomes compare with our vision for the system? <p><u>Professional Agency & Power</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How might certain outcomes reproduce inequity or achieve greater equity for students and teachers? <p><u>Interactions with Other System Elements</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members: How do members' identities and positions shape who the outcomes serve? • Community: How do outcomes reinforce or challenge community values and power structures? • Focus: How do current outcomes reflect or distort the focus? • Roles: How does the division of work shape equity or inequity in outcomes? • Tools/Resources: How do the tools used determine the kind of outcomes produced? • Norms: How do group rules and norms influence the type of outcomes that are possible? • Outcomes: What contradictions exist between intended outcomes and unintended outcomes, and how do these shape perceptions of success or failure?

Engaging with the ASF is not a one-time exercise. Each time you use it, you'll see your system with greater clarity and uncover new possibilities for learning and improvement. Over time, it becomes both a lens and a guide for leading change.