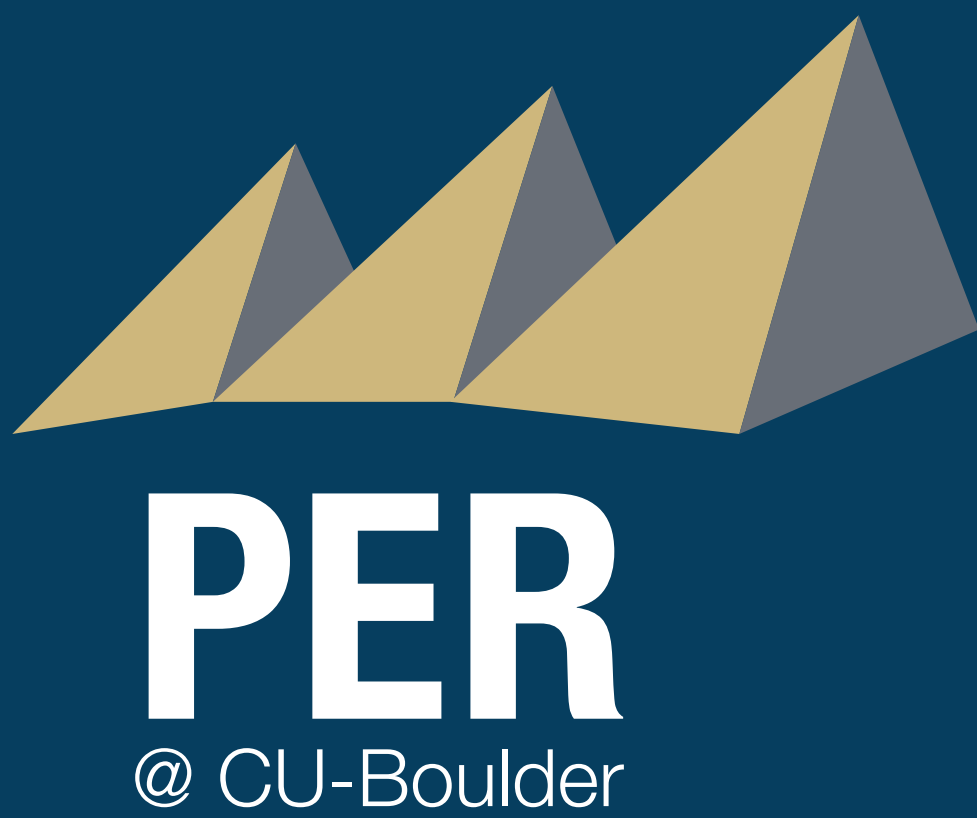


Department Action Teams: A New Model for Empowering Faculty to Make Sustainable Change

Joel C. Corbo, Daniel L. Reinholz, Melissa H. Dancy, and Noah Finkelstein
Center for STEM Learning & Department of Physics, University of Colorado Boulder



SUMMARY

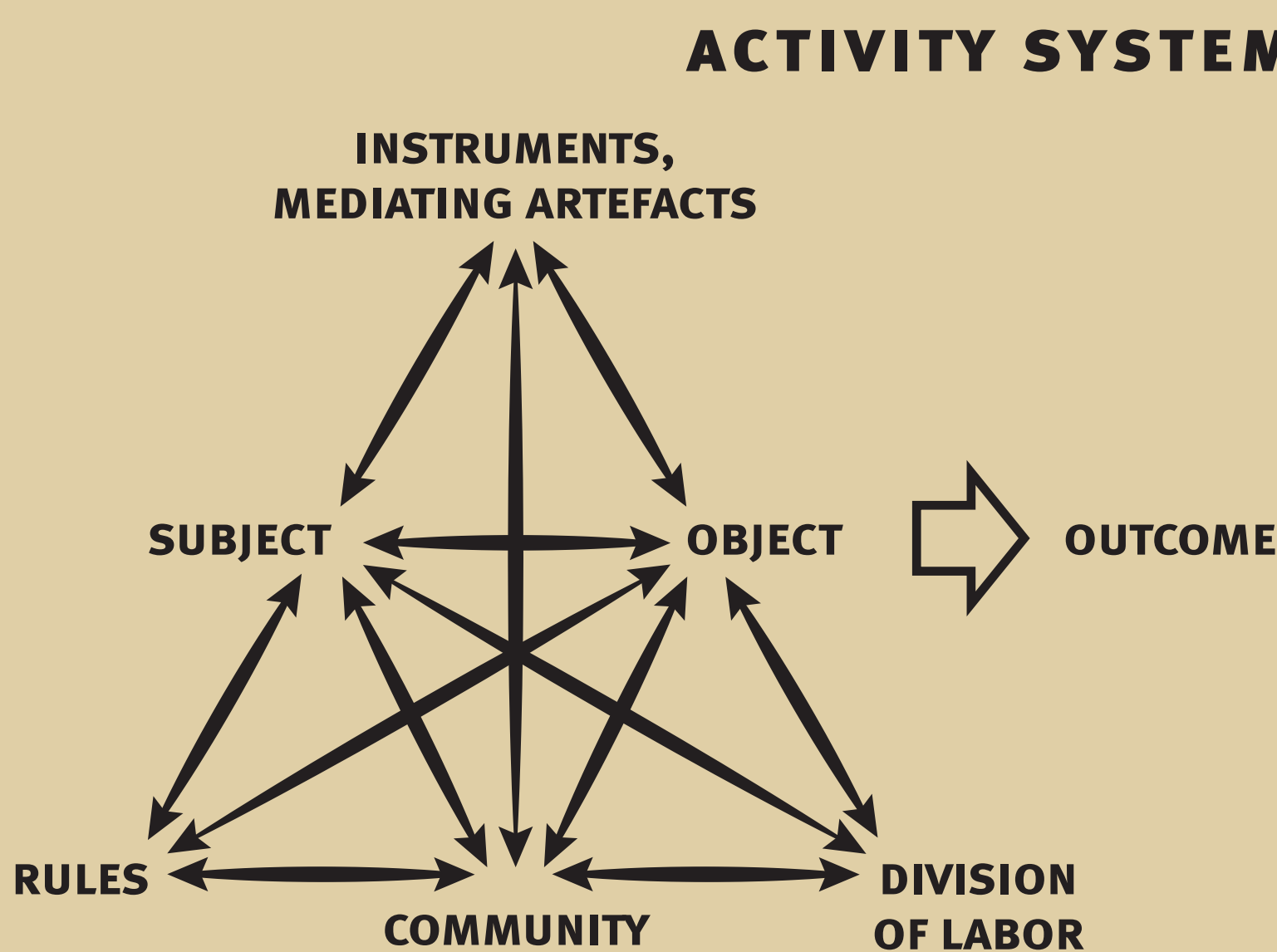
Department Action Teams (DATs) are a **new type of faculty working group** that empower faculty members within a department to make **sustainable change** by designing and implementing **structures** to address **an educational problem of broad-scale importance**.

THE DAT MODEL

GOAL Create sustainable departmental change by supporting teams to collaboratively address an educational issue.

Departure from conventional change strategies (individual faculty development, top-down policy mandates).

Related to, but distinct from, Faculty Learning Communities¹ (FLCs), can analyze differences with Activity Theory²:



	FLC	DAT
SUBJECT	Faculty member	Faculty member, staff, or student
OBJECT	Teaching of individual courses	Department-wide educational issue
MEDIATING ARTEFACTS	Education research, external facilitators	Education and institutional change research, institutional data, external facilitators
COMMUNITY	Faculty across departments	Members of one department
DIVISION OF LABOR	Similar efforts in parallel	Collective work on one goal
RULES	Agency, community	Agency, community, collaboration
OUTCOME	Individual change, transformed course	Collective change, transformed department

ROLE OF FACILITATORS

- Provide expertise in education research and institutional change
- Provide logistical support
- Interface with administration
- Encourage collaboration, openness, and mutual respect
- Ask questions that force articulation of unspoken departmental assumptions
- Mitigate pre-existing status differentials, put participants on equal footing.

¹ M. D. Cox, Introduction to faculty learning communities. New Dir. Teach. Learn. 2004, 5 (2004)
² Y. Engeström, Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit (1987)

EXAMPLE DAT

PARTICIPANT-CHOSEN AREA OF FOCUS The underrepresentation of women and students of color as undergraduates in their major.

“I signed up as interested in the DAT because of a specific area ...: trying to improve the experiences of women and underrepresented minority [Department] majors. I thought the DAT might be a good way to work with a group to collect more information on where things stand now and think about changes and ways to track changes in the future.”

STRUCTURE & ACTIVITIES

- 5 participants:
- two tenured, two untenured, one postdoc
 - three men, two women
- 15 1-hour meetings between 10/28 & 6/2
- Major activities:
- Analysis of 10-year dataset on student trajectories through the major
 - Researching national trends and best practices from other institutions
 - Report to the department on findings and recommendations

OUTCOMES

- Creation of a Committee on Representation, Retention, and Recruitment (continuation of DAT)
- Creation of a report with in-depth analysis of student data
- “[I]f they hadn't stood up at the faculty meeting and announced that there were resources to figure out some type of change to the department, then probably this wouldn't have happened.”

PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

ON FACILITATION

- “They kept us on track. They made sure that there was communication all the time. They did what . . . a typical faculty member won't do, which is to send emails and to hold people to a meeting schedule and to assign jobs.”
- “Having [the facilitators] moderate the DAT seems to reduce any preexisting hierarchy among members of the DAT that exists from department structures. This is appreciated by us junior members!”
- “[S]o someone who was tone deaf might very well have come in and said you're at fifteen percent [women]? What the hell is wrong with you? So the need to match culturally to what the realities are and to not find them offensive but simply the reality, I think, allowed us to move on very quickly to let's find out what the numbers are, let's find out what we can learn.”

ON THE VALUE OF THE DAT

- “I enjoyed talking with those people, I enjoyed thinking about those issues . . . I liked to hang out with them for an hour every two weeks.”
- “It's valuable in that I feel like we are moving towards really effecting change.”
- “Why are so many of these things the DAT did . . . not part of the department plan? . . . It's frustrating to me that the [department] community here doesn't seem to care . . . So working with people who care . . . that was just really nice.”



This project is supported by the AAU STEM Education Initiative