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Using CHAT in higher education studies

For many higher education scholars, scholarship should be characterized by a commitment to collegial and critical thought and resistance to the taken-for-granted social order. However, academics may struggle to orient these principles towards their own changing workplaces, which are often characterized by increasing administrative, teaching and research pressures conducted against a backdrop of 'creeping managerialism'.

If academics are to address these difficulties, and so also pursue the principles of scholarship, there is a need to provide forums where they may address some of these challenges in their working lives. My contention is that the overall paradigm and methodology offered by CHAT can support such collaborative and critical forums.

At one level, simply working with activity systems provides academic staff with a means to visualize all at once the competing pressures of their working lives, thus opening up space for the development of new, future visions. The much longer-term change laboratory provides academic staff with a 'safe space' to recurrently and developmentally engage in questioning current working conditions. Through engaging in historical analysis it is possible to examine how things have changed over time and what the possible future trajectories may signify. Such understandings can evoke resistance to current moves and the development of new possibilities which may challenge the status quo, both in terms of the institution and specific aspects of academic development and curriculum and to the university's relationship with society. I think the importance and usefulness of change lab work was best summed up by one university workshop participant (and current co-researcher, Janet Purcell Van Graan):

'As an experienced facilitator I was excited by the marriage of a pragmatic response to change coupled with depth of research in the change lab. The flexible and contextual structure of the activity triangle, when mapped across the dimensions of past, present and future, gives what amounts to a three-dimensional view of complex and focused changes over time. The articulation of problems and identification of themes follows a bottom-up path, from the individual to the emergence of what is shared, from the abstract to the concrete with

an expressed utilisation of the psychodynamic aspects of group work, viz the double bind and use of provocations. This engagement with emotion seems to contribute energy to develop new solutions’.

Change laboratory work does not need to be limited to academics but can also entail working with students as they confront issues at the interface between university and working life, for example during work-integrated learning.

Ongoing research

My current, ongoing research involves three related projects. The first is a change laboratory focused on the thorny issue of including and implementing graduate attributes into the curriculum. Staff are currently challenging the attributes’ origins, purpose, suitability and implementation within the multi-disciplinary and changing student environment of the university. Such questioning matters as graduate attributes hold a dual role of highlighting what the university values as well as providing students with the sorts of abilities they need to flourish in society. The change laboratory participants are currently trying-out and concretizing new ideas for forwarding the graduate attributes which they developed in the workshops.

The second change laboratory involves a final year group of health faculty students who are alternating between university studies and work practices in their work-integrated learning (WIL) periods in hospitals and clinics. Students experience a disjunct between university study and actual work practice, which is often aggravated by difficult relationships between the workplace supervisors and the student-workers, and their unpaid status as students. Though still at early stages there is evidence of students becoming self-empowered to put forward constructive changes to their WIL experiences.

Both of these projects fall within the current National Research Foundation funded project ‘Change Laboratories in work-integrated learning and university engagement for equity and sustainability, 2023-2025’. Progress will be reported on at the upcoming ‘Researching Work and Learning’ conference in Linköping in June 2024.

The third project involves experimenting with ‘contradiction analysis’ workshops with university work-integrated learning (WIL) practitioners at various sites in South Africa and overseas. Workshop participants are tasked with developing their own WIL activity systems and collaboratively identifying pressure points. As one participant observed ‘... the idea of everything being linked up and the idea of system dynamics ... the triangle helped us identify the ‘oomphs’ (difficulties) in order that we can come up with solutions’. As researchers, we were interested in the extent to which such workshops may provide a stimulus for and precursor to more detailed change laboratory work. This work is part of a South Africa - Sweden University Forum funded project ‘Collaborative, cross-border work-integrated learning practice research through a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory lens (WIL-CHAT)’ with University West’s Maria Spante, and will be presented at the U. West hosted WACE conference in June 2024.

Reflection on future plans

At my own university in Cape Town one future proposal is to set up a WIL-CHAT research unit with our colleagues at University West and further develop new WIL researchers through collaborative PhD work. This, it is hoped, will build on my own and my colleagues past and current CHAT research. Furthermore, following on from prior contradiction analysis workshops with WIL practitioners, myself and colleagues aim to mobilise the emerging tensions in order to initiate a full-scale change laboratory.

At a more general institutional level, there is an interesting 'slow scholarship' movement emerging internationally as a form of resistance to the creeping managerialism of university structures. Slow scholarship refers to the collective examination of academic and societal issues in some depth, with the aim of cultivating thoughtful, imaginative and socially just alternatives to current trends. My forward-looking interest is in assessing the potential of mobilizing CHAT methodologies towards developing such forms of scholarship.

(the current change laboratory work was inspired by Professors Engeström and Sannino's visit to Cape Town in 2015, and Professor Virkkunen's training workshops in 2016/17).

References

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