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I began my scholarly career working in history under the supervision of a historical geographer named John McQuilton. John had written his own PhD about a very famous Australian ‘bushranger’ (outlaw) Ned Kelly.

The story and myth of the home-made-helmet-wearing Ned Kelly is ambiguous within Australian popular culture. To many, Kelly was nothing more than a murderer and thief. Yet to others—and here lies his enduring fame—Kelly was a hero who stood up to a corrupt and brutal system of state oppression. In either telling, though, Kelly’s story is typically cast as the archetypal ‘hero’s journey’. That is, Kelly is a lonely figure almost unexpectedly thrown into adventure and peril, testing his character, bravery, and skill.

McQuilton’s take on the story was quite different. He argued that Kelly’s career was overtaken from within a community, and was the almost inevitable result of a broken system of land distribution in the young colony of Victoria.

This was all before I had read anything on material dialectics or the like, but it did set me on a path of looking for explanations of human action within the social and material milieu in which they occur. Along the way I have met—mostly in the literature—many others with this same ambition. The French *Annales* school writing the history through the deep investigation of geography, material culture and *mentalité* or the ‘psychology of the epoch’, has been particularly influential.

In the busyness of life, history became something of a hobby as educational design and the Learning Sciences came to dominate my professional life. My educational training was long enough after Cole had brought the works of Vygotsky into English for concepts such as the ‘zone of proximal development’ had become a standard part of the curriculum in Australian universities. I must confess, though, I was a bit slow. It was only year later reading books from Roth that I began to see the similarities between Vygotsky’s inter-psychological processes and the *mentalités* that had so held my historical interest. From Roth I read on to Engeström, and in his work on a third generation of CHAT I found a set of tools that released a tension between my own

scholarly history on the one hand, and the community of educational design which I now inhabited.

My work today

Today I lead a research team with an over-arching interest in the implementation of research-based educational design. We are interested in how research into things such as self-efficacy, creativity, anxiety and motivation can and should influence education for young people, and particularly in schools and museums.

Within this work CHAT is central to a process we call *Pragmatic Adaptive Modelling*. Our approach, of course, draws heavily on the Change Laboratory approach of Engeström. It is intended, however, to work more smoothly within the Australian educational policy context in which the randomised control trial (RCT) is so often promoted as the ‘gold standard’ and perhaps only legitimate form of evidence for educational action.

Our Pragmatic Adaptive approach essentially augments CHAT with the evaluation methodology known as *Contribution Analysis* in order to present ‘testable’ theories of change. This allows us to play ‘within’ the cultural-historical assumptions of the communities with which we engage. It also opens up our research to a diversity of methodologies including many that remain quite nascent within education such as social network analysis and trace data analysis.

Something we have found in taking the Pragmatic Adaptive approach is that once we open the ‘epistemic door’, CHAT has held extraordinarily powerful explanatory value when working with collaborators from outside our field. As soon as we start to identify the different rules and tools in use within an activity system, it seems we can rapidly begin to explore how multiple and diverse subjects and objects can also exist.

Some Recent Papers:

Johnson, L., Devis, D., Bacholer, C., & Leonard, S. N. (2024). Closing the loop by expanding the scope: using learning analytics within a pragmatic adaptive engagement with complex learning environments. *Frontiers in Education*, 9.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1379520>

Leonard, S.N.; Devis, D.; MacGill, B.; Unsworth, P.; Colton, J.; Fowler, S. (2024). Enhancing empathy for justice: A methodology for expansive teacher professional development through Creative Body-Based Learning. *Sustainability* 2024, 16, 95.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/su16010095>