

CHAT RESEARCH PROFILE: ELSA MENTZ



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Elsa Mentz's research niche is self-directed learning (SDL), and specifically the affordances of cooperative learning to enhance SDL. Elsa's work on SDL over the years was internationally acknowledged when she received the Malcolm Knowles Award in 2020. When Josef de Beer (see his CHAT Research Profile) joined the North-West University in 2015, Elsa and Josef started to focus on how the holders of indigenous knowledge (Josef's research focus) were, per definition, self-directed learners. Elsa and Josef soon realized that CHAT provides an effective research lens to juxtapose two activity systems (on institutional plane), namely self-directed learning as a subject in one activity system, and indigenous knowledge as subject in the second activity system. They realized that the same tools apply in both activity

systems, e.g., cooperative learning and problem-based learning. This research could be summarized by the Latin expression, '*respice, prospice*', as we sometimes need to look back first, in order to look forward. Indigenous knowledge systems have profound insights to offer modern school education.

However, both Elsa and Josef are involved in teacher education, and the two researchers also used CHAT as a lens in research on teacher education in respectively Finland and South Africa, and which Finnish best practices could be applied to the South African context.

In 2021, based on five years' experience of using CHAT in self-directed learning research, Elsa and Josef published a paper in the *South African Journal of Higher Education*, hailing CHAT as a research lens in mixed-methods research. Elsa and Josef suggested in this paper that quantitative data (from the various SDL instruments) should be supplemented by qualitative data, and that CHAT could then be used as a research lens in such mixed-methods research, to provide more nuanced understandings of changes in peoples' self-directed learning. CHAT, these researchers claim, is a robust meta-theoretical framework, which could provide a thick description of the findings in self-directed learning research.

Currently Elsa and Josef are researching the role of Change Laboratories and fourth-generation CHAT, in bringing about much-needed change in the South African educational sector.

Some publications

Mentz, E., & De Beer, J. (2021). Cultural-Historical Activity Theory as a lens in mixed methods research on self-directed learning. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 35(5), 163-183.

Mentz, E., & De Beer, J. (2020). Self-directed learning in teacher education: Lessons from Finland. In: J de Beer, N. Petersen & H van Vuuren (eds), *Becoming a teacher: Research on the work-integrated learning of student teachers*. Stellenbosch: AOSIS.

Mentz, E., & De Beer, J. (2019). The use of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory in researching the affordances of indigenous knowledge for self-directed learning. In: J. de Beer (Ed), *The decolonization of the curriculum project: The affordances of indigenous knowledge for self-directed learning*. Stellenbosch: AOSIS.

Mentz, E. & De Beer, J. (2019). The affordances of Change Laboratories for improved sustainability and impact of in-service teacher professional development

programmes. Proceedings of the ISES 8th Teaching and Education Conference, Vienna, Austria, 17 – 20 September 2019, pp 252-271.