Researching change-oriented workplace learning and sustainable development practices

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We seek to understand the dynamics of change-oriented workplace learning processes within the global and national challenges of sustainable development.
What does this unfolding socio-ecological crisis mean for:

• Knowledge production and sharing in workplaces and communities?

• The relationship between standards setting, curriculum development, quality teaching and learning, human agency and social change in responding to unstable habitats, economies, lifestyles?
Broad Theoretical Frameworks

**Critical Realism** as philosophical under-labourer (layered ontology; morphogenesis; reflexive deliberation – after Archer 2003; 2005).

**Social learning theory** (after Bandura 1975; Wals 2007).

**Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)** (after Engeström, 1998).

- 121 credit Learnership at NQF Level 5.

- Offered by WESSA, a SAQA-accredited provider, through the ETDP-SETA.

- Qualification’s purpose: “... prepare candidates to function as entry-level environmental education practitioners” (SAQA, 2005).
Paper in progress…

“Contradictions as drivers of change within and between activity systems: a case study of ethics-oriented teaching and learning in a Learnership”.
The Activity System of 2 Learner-practitioners learning about the ethical dimensions of their work

**Subject:**
Two learner-practitioners on the EETDP Learnership, employed by the Wetlands Conservation Project.

**Mediating artefacts:**
Course notes, assignments, on-course activities, lectures, institutional literature etc.

**Rules:**
- SAQA Unit Stds and Assessment Criteria;
- Learnership structure;
- Job descriptions & instit working arrangements.
- Accepted environmental identity and values.

**Community:**
- Course developers, facilitators, tutors, assessors and students.
- Workplace mentors, line managers, colleagues.

**Division of Labour:**
- Roles on the course
- Roles in the workplace
- Roles as environmentalists in society.

**Object:**
Understanding of environmental values and ethics.

**Outcome:**
Increasing reflexivity regarding the ethical dimensions of EETD practice.
The ethics-oriented component of the qualification (21 of 121 credits)

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<tr>
<th>Unit Std Title</th>
<th>Credits</th>
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<tr>
<td>13668: Work ethically and professionally as an environmental education practitioner.</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>13649: Apply fundamental knowledge of environmental ethics to a field of work or study.</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>13640: Research and analyse an environmental issue in terms of principles of environmental justice and sustainability and recommend possible solutions.</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>8367: Understand and develop conservation ethics.</td>
<td>4</td>
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In this particular case study...

• Learners have shown limited engagement with the ethics component of the course (*E.g. those sections in the PoE are simply left blank*);

• Course facilitators regularly postponed, shortened or cancelled ethics-oriented teaching sessions.

• Yet learners and facilitators say that ethics is very important to them and is central to their work.
Using a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) framework:

- Requires consideration of the cultural and historical underpinnings of the phenomena;

- Hence, we see the current activity system not as a static snap-shot, but as a dynamic, historically constituted process.
Identifying CONTRADICTIONS

• Contradictions are “historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems” (Engeström, 2001).

• They are “fundamental tensions and misalignments in the structure that typically manifest themselves as problems, ruptures, and breakdowns in the functioning of the activity system” (Virkkunen & Kuutti, 2000).

• Contradictions are seen as having generative potential, as drivers of change and development in activity systems.
Some incidences of tensions & contradictions:

- Rules ↔ Subject
- Rules ↔ Community
- Mediating Tools ↔ Subject
We can also trace a ‘domino effect’ of contradictions across interacting activity systems:
Conclusions:

• CHAT has proved to be useful in identifying contradictions that influence learner-practitioners’ engagement with the ethical dimensions of their work.

• Once identified, these contradictions can be scrutinised to stimulate change at multiple levels: with the learners, with the course provider, the workplace, and with SAQA.

• Hopefully, this kind of collective scrutiny and dialogue allows research to fulfil its broader function of contributing to reflexivity and change.