

Exploring Pedagogical Innovation in Core Curriculum Serving First Year Students

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ABSTRACT This mixed method intervention case study explores the potential of pedagogical innovation in higher education to expand learning activity of undergraduate students' first year students in a university primarily serving students with little access to educational advantage. The pedagogical intervention at the centre of the study placed emphasis on learning activity and critical meaning making within an interactive learning architecture. It took the form of a semester course for all entering first year students. The intervention is presented as a third generation activity model with three interacting toolkits. This paper focuses on the reading and writing activity of the 2010 student cohort. Upwards of 70% of students suggested that their reading and writing practice had changed by the end of the course. Student narratives suggest that as motive expanded both reading and writing activity expanded and complimentary learning activity expanded. Students with less historical access to educational advantage made the strongest claims. The study suggests that under the right conditions, this combination of pedagogical elements can expand learning practice of first year students and may be particularly well aligned for appropriation by students with less access to historical socio-educational privilege.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Pedagogical Domain and First Year Studies

Despite expectations for the massive expansion of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa, participation rates in higher education remain roughly 17% (Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2010). Access to graduation is even more contracted. Cohort data from 2000 suggests that after five years of entering; only 30% of students had graduated, with 56% leaving without graduating. The greatest attrition from higher education occurs at the end of the first year of study (Scott et al. 2007). The lack of 'performance' in higher education is increasingly being attributed to the 'under-prepared' first year student (Scott 2012). This study shifts the gaze from the 'underprepared student' to the domain of pedagogical practice, exploring the potential of pedagogical innovation to expand the learning practice and meaning making of first year students.

The field of first year studies has exploded onto the scene of higher education within the industrialised North over the past 30 years (Barefoot 2000; Tinto 1987, 1997; Astin 1993). Research has sought to identify factors that increase learning success in the context of first year transitions (Astin 1993; Tinto 1987) and examine a range of institutional responses to

better cater for the first year student (Barefoot 2000; Tinto 1997; Yorke and Thomas 2003). The field is beginning to germinate within South African higher education research (Leibowitz et al. 2012). The South African literature primarily emanates from academic development centres, and focuses largely on 'foundational' provisioning (CHE 2010: 177; Scott et al. 2007: 43-47), extended degree programmes (Scott 2012), and other parallel support programmes for a small subset of entering students. While holding important lessons for wider practice (Scott 2012), analysts conclude that these initiatives have remained largely fragmented, un-coordinated, susceptible to overly 'remedial' intentions, troubled by perceptions of racist undertones (Soudien et al. 2008: 64), and relegated to the margins of what remains constituted as 'academic work' (Scott et al. 2007: 47; CHE 2010: 177). At the conclusion of their detailed investigation of the teaching and learning domain across three institutions in South Africa, the Council on Higher Education (2010) concludes that the next generation of research must look more closely at the pedagogical domain from a critical perspective.

1.2. Historic Backdrop

The historic backdrop to the study is characterised by the contradictions and discontinuities at the interface of the emergence of

a largely 'historically black' liberal missionary institution and the turbulent century of dispossession and resistance in South Africa throughout the

Twentieth century (Swartz 2005; Maharaj et al. 2011). With the formal inception of democracy in 1994, the social imagination of the university, counter-imposed on a landscape of institutional neglect, created special expectations (and contradictions) longing to express themselves in a period looking toward re-birth and renewal.

By 2007, institutional energies for more fundamental transformation had been largely consumed by a politico-administrative fight for institutional survival in a policy landscape increasingly delineated by access to historic advantage (CHE 2010: 2; Swartz 2005: 21; Bundy 2006: 14-15). Hoping to re-energise the intellectual project of the university, institutional leaders supported a unique process of institutional self-critique, taking the form of '*iincoko*', an isiXhosa notion occupied with an emphasis on critical horizontal and forward looking dialogue, bringing together voices outside of formal hierarchies. A critique emerged at the interface of institutional and student practice. Students enter higher education with fragile academic learning activity; the meaning attached to learning activity is tightly aligned to academic survival. The curricular and pedagogical domains of the institution largely serve to reproduce the fragile student learning activity, and provide few opportunities to deepen the socio-personal meaning making of students in reference to the university project.

As suggested by Engeström's theory of expansive learning (1999), the critique of present practice led to a 'radical' view of the potential future. The radical view moved away from the problematic of the 'unprepared student' toward the generative potential of new students to elaborate (Archer 2010) the structure of higher education itself over time. The imaginative horizon looked toward an institutional culture better able to expand the learning activity of incoming students – placing students at the ontologic and epistemologic centre of transformation potentials.

One strategy emerging was to develop a core first-year credit-bearing transdisciplinary semester course, across faculties. Providing students and lecturers with an opportunity to experiment

with pedagogical innovations in response to this critique. This idea became known as the 'Grounding Programme (GP)' and over time was named 'Life, Knowledge, Action (LKA)'.

In 2008, a group of students and lecturers moved into what Engeström (2007) terms a critical design phase. A group of students formed themselves into an autonomous working group engaging in student led activities and dialogue. Students and lecturers worked together to build pedagogical tools drawing from the nexus of socio-cultural activity theory and the praxis of this group of students. In 2009, the course was piloted with 360 students in the main campus of the university. In 2010, the course was piloted with 652 students across the two largest campuses.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study was an intervention case study, based on the work of socio-cultural activity theory (Engeström 2007; Daniels 2008: 115-147). Intervention research reflects the methodological emphases established through the early work of Vygotsky (1978). It emphasises a developmental (or genetic) approach to the study of mental function through a dialectical lens. At its centre is the notion of 'double stimulation'. The first stimuli represents a problem, the second stimuli represents an auxiliary means potentially useful to solve the problem (or to construct alternative tools to solve the problem). As summarised by Valsiner, 'it creates the conditions under which a subject's course of action toward an experimentally given goal makes explicit the psychological processes involved in that action' (Valsiner 1990: 66). Engeström (2007) is widely credited for building upon these starting points to establish tools of intervention research capable of exploring processes of change within activity systems. Activity theorists place emphasis on the process of mediation between the intra-psyche and social realms. Third generation theorists place emphasis on the relationship within an activity system, each activity defined as a dialectical process of mediation between a subject (individual or collective), mediating tools or artefacts and the activity object (or motive).

Intervention research demands explication of method at two levels – an explanation of the intervention itself (an expanded notion of 'the

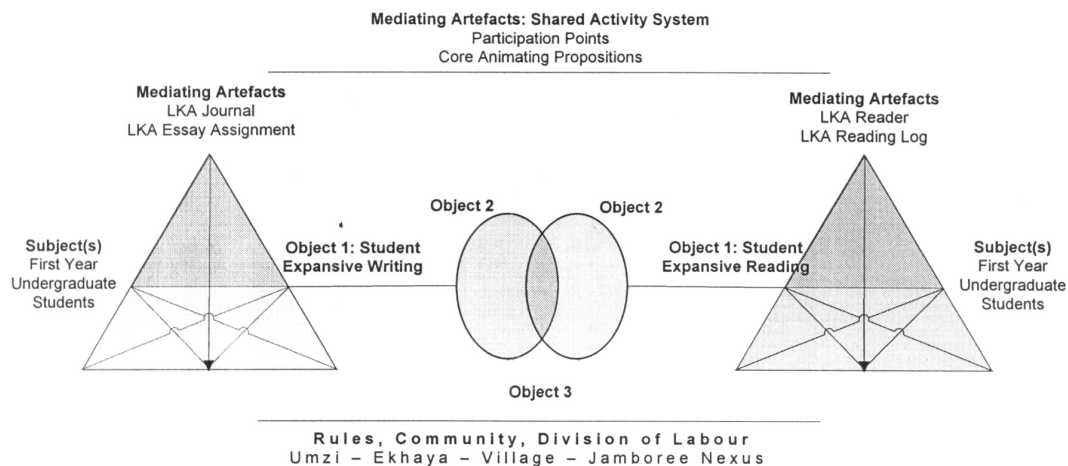


Fig. 1. Activity system model: Pedagogical intervention

second stimuli'), and the means through which the intervention experience is studied.

2.2. Pedagogical Intervention

The pedagogical intervention at the centre of this study is presented through a third generation activity system model in Figure 1 (Engeström 1999). While the entire pedagogical architecture was more complex, the study focused on the interaction of two activities, defined by the object of expanded student reading and writing activity respectively. The primary subject of the activity system was first year undergraduate students. The mediating artefacts took the form of three interacting toolkits (Table 1). The first toolkit contained learning tools explicitly developed to expand writing and reading activity. Writing activity was mediated by two tools — the 'LKA Journal' and the 'LKA Assignment'. The 'LKA Journal' was an A4 notebook imbued with special meaning. Students earned a participation point (see below) for each day they completed writing one page of autonomous writing. The 'LKA Assignment'

was a marked assignment with emphasis placed on the activity of research, writing and re-writing. Expanded reading activity was also mediated by two tools — the 'LKA Reading Log' and the 'LKA Reader'. The 'LKA Reading Log' supported the externalisation of strategic reading, supporting students to make inferences, pose questions and summarise before, during and after reading activity. The 'LKA Reader' was a collection of written materials across genre, divided into 6 themes, developed (and chosen) through an iterative engagement between committed students and lecturers.

The second toolkit provided the course community with an expanded toolkit for critical meaning making. It took the form of participation points and critical animating propositions. Participation points were allocated on the basis of participation in the learning activity of the course (reading, writing, dialogue etc.), the act of doing. They were imbued with a 'philosophy of life', known by students as 'stepping in'. It was suggested that when you 'step in' more fully to life, then 'we' (individually and collectively) 'win'. The course architecture was imbued with

Table 1: Summary of activity system: Subject, objects and mediating tools

Activity	Expanded object	Toolkit 1	Toolkit 2	Toolkit 3
		Learning activity tools	Expansion of meaning making	Alternative learning architecture
1	Self generative writing	Tool 1: LKA Journal Tool 2: LKA Essay	Participation points Core animating propositions	Umzi – Ekhaya – Village – Jamboree Nexus
2	Self generative reading	Tool 1: LKA Reader Tool 2: Reading Log		

meaning through six critical animating propositions, each aligned to promote a critique of the past and present, and aligned with expanding student agency in reference to the design of the future (McLaren 2009; Giroux 2009; Hooks 2003; Freire 1970; Engeström 1999). The propositions brought the discussion of students' fragile learning activity out of the privatised domain of frustration; spoke to the philosophy of 'stepping in'; made meaning of a 'high bar' (raised expectations for learning activity); provided a critical lens in which to analyse the dehumanising inheritances of history; brought together notions of individual activity and collective building; and suggested that students were important for 'our collective future'. They answered the question 'why does 'it' matter?'

Understanding that activity is profoundly influenced by its social context (Engeström 1999; Daniels 2001) and that first year students are particularly sensitive to the socio-academic context of learning (Tinto 1997; Astin 1993), the final toolkit was designed to directly mediate the transformation of the learning community itself. The new learning architecture was rooted in the '*Umzi*' (home (*imizi* (*Pl*))), a student-led autonomous grouping of six students, designed as a space of discussion, support and student accountability (whereby participation points are allocated). Four *imizi* combined to form an '*Ekhaya*', used to roughly designate an extended family. Meeting early every two week cycle and supported by a trained student facilitator, the *Ekhaya* was designed to support more substantive discussion of the reading material and course activities. Meeting at the end of every two week cycle, the *Village* combined four *Ekhaya*, and allowed for interaction between students and lecturers to expand the learning horizon emerging through each theme of work. Twice a term, *Villages* came together into a campus wide '*Jamboree*' where students had the opportunity to express their views, aspirations, thoughts and concerns on theme material through the creative work of drama, poetry, song, and debate.

2.3. Case Study Method

The study population included 652 students formally registered and participating in the 2010 pilot. The primary dataset emerged from student questionnaires completed at the beginning,

middle and end of the course. The massive dataset (over 575,000 words) included a number of quantitative and qualitative elements.

The objective of the quantitative work was to establish the larger patterns of activity and meaning making across the study population and explore the influence of a series of independent variables. Three quantitative analyses were undertaken, each including the entire student population. A univariate analysis provided basic descriptive outputs. A factor analysis sought to combine dependent variables which enjoyed enough reliability and construct validity. Finally, two General Linear Models were applied to each dependent variable (and construct) to explore the effect of 10 independent variables related to university (campus, faculty and residence), demographics (gender, age, nationality, home language, learning language and parental education), and pedagogic architecture (*Ekhaya*, *Village*)).

Five open ended questions were evaluated to achieve a more detailed and nuanced understanding of student experience.

A subset of the qualitative questions was analysed, relating to students' discussion of reading and writing tools and activity. A random sample of one in every five records were analysed through an iterative theme analysis.

The second quantitative analysis was undertaken with academic course mark data, including the entire student population. This analysis sought to compare the second year course marks of students who participated with students who did not participate. A General Linear Model was applied using average grade as the dependent variable and course participation, qualification and demographic covariates (gender, age, language, nationality) as independent variables. Given the strong influence of qualification type, qualification matched groups were identified for more detailed comparative testing.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Differentiated Impact

Upwards of 80% of students suggested that the course directly impacted their learning activity in a positive way. About 76% of students said their reading and 71% of students said their writing practice had changed by the end of the course. Over 80% of students indicated that the

experience made them better readers (85%) and better writers (84%) and increased their interest in reading (85%) and writing (81%).

Students with less access to previous socio-cultural educational advantage placed more value on the course and made stronger claims about the course impacting their learning activity. Students whose home language was isiXhosa agreed more strongly than students with access to English in their home environments that their reading abilities had improved, and that this improvement was related to their participation in the course ($p=0.003$). Similarly, students attending non-Model C public schools agreed more strongly than students who had attended Model C schools ($p=0.026$). Students whose home language was isiXhosa ($p=0.000$) as well as students whose parents had less access to education ($p=0.019$) agreed more strongly that their writing activity had improved due to their participation in the course. Students whose home language was isiXhosa ($p=0.009$) and who attended normal public schools ($p=0.042$) made stronger claims of improvement in reference to the constructs that combined ability, interest and enjoyment of reading and writing practice.

3.2. The New Move: Beyond Activity Avoidance

Students were asked to describe the change in their reading and writing practice. Consistent with the acclaimed and widely cited work of Leontiev's (1978), students invariably spoke to the transformation of their activity motive. Students entered with a contracted motive in relationship to both reading and writing activity, tightly aligned to academic survival ('I was the kind of person who read only when there is going to be a test'; 'to be honest I never really wrote before').

Perhaps the most significant activity expansion was the initial move away from activity avoidance. In reference to writing, students primarily point to the experience of the LKA Journal as mediating their 'new move'. Students made more mention of the LKA Journal by name than any other tool. By the end of the course, almost one quarter of students identified the LKA Journal as either their favourite or second favourite course element – placing their experience with the LKA Journal above the easily accessible movie and Jamboree.

The experience of students with the LKA Journal was neither linear nor uncontested. While roughly 80% of students indicated that the journal had become an important part of their life, almost 45% of students said that it was too much work and should be eliminated from the course. Approximately 80% of students said that they intended to continue writing in their Journal after the course, while only 30% indicated a strong intention to do so. Despite significantly writing fewer pages ($p=0.008$), isiXhosa speaking students ($p<0.0001$) and students whose parents had less access to formal education ($p=0.014$) indicated that the LKA Journal was more useful and had more value in their lives. They were also more likely to indicate that they intended to continue to write in their LKA Journal after the course ($p=0.047$).

3.3. Expansions of Activity Motive

The first expansion of motive appearing through student narratives takes the form of an initial ability claim. Students shift motive from its most contracted form ('its not me'/'I don't like') to claim 'I see that I can' or 'I am able now.' While multidirectional, this claim mostly preceded the potential emergence of more expanded claims. The motive appears to undergo the next transformation through an affective claim, from its contracted form (I can't / I don't like / but I have to) to the more expanded form (I see that I can/I like/I am interested).

As motive expands, activity expands in both breadth and depth. Using writing activity as an example, student narratives suggest that as motive expands, students start to write more. Over time, some students suggest it becomes a 'habit' ('I go no day ending without writing'; 'I carried [LKA Journal] everywhere'). For at least some students, this expansive cycle of activity leads toward greater appropriation, where a tool increasingly becomes 'one's own' (Wertsch and Stone 1985). We see evidence in two forms. First, we see evidence of appropriation in the expanded activity of writing itself. Students said they 'can do more' with their writing ('I can now do more in terms of writing'); they said they were better able to use writing to accurately reflect their own intentions ('I would think about something and then write the opposite of what I thought but now that is not happening'); they said that they wrote more fluently; and they said

that they were venturing out to new writing territories (other academic work, other writing genres). Consistent with the approach of activity theorists, as students used tools and applied them to different products, students spoke to an emerging sense of creativity ('...it inspired me to be creative about anything and everything'). Second, we see evidence of appropriation in the narrative of meaning making. As emphasised through the work of Bakhtin (1981), a tool becomes 'one's own' only when 'the speaker populates it with his [sic] own intention.' As the course progressed, students increasingly used their own expressive intentional language to discuss their relationship with activity and mediating tools ('[the LKA Journal] was like one's own jungle where one could go wild, hey-wire and even seem mad').

Finally, under the right conditions, student narratives associated expanded reading and writing activity with expanded complementary learning activity. Expanded writing activity was associated most strongly with expanded acts of expression ('I have seen through writing I can express myself and I didn't know that before'). Expanded reading activity was associated with the expansion of the acts of critical thinking ('I can think critically from what I used to do') and 'finding out' ('it has encouraged me to research and read-up on all topics and things that pop up in and around me'). The course experience as a whole was associated with an expanded confidence in study activity ('I am putting more effort and seeing more results'), as well as an expanded sense of participation, where students experience themselves as more active participants in the social and intellectual life around them ('I am no longer shy, I participate in everything now').

3.4. Pedagogical Architecture

By the end of the course, the three newer pedagogical forms (the *Umzi*, LKA Journal and the Jamboree) were more controversial than the more common forms (the Reader, *Ekhaya* and *Village*.) The most controversial activity element was the *Umzi*. Approximately one third of students rated the *Umzi* as 'very useful', another third rated it as 'useful' and another third rated it as 'not useful'. The students who did not consider the *Umzi* to be useful indicated that they were unable to get the *Umzi* to meet. Students

with less access to historic educational advantage (who spoke isiXhosa as a home language, attended 'normal' public schools, and whose parents had less access to education) placed more value on the new pedagogical elements, particularly the *Umzi* and the LKA Journal than students with more access to educational privilege.

The general linear analysis suggested that the course architecture had a significant effect over the learning experience of students. The *Ekhaya* had a significant effect over how students experienced their *Umzi* ($p=0.004$). The *Village* had a significant effect on students' reading and writing practice ($p=0.017$), their experience of the *Umzi* ($p<0.0001$), and their overall evaluation of the impact of the course ($p=0.016$).

Students associated each of the learning levels with different yet overlapping activity. Each of the levels was associated with dialogic activity related to reading and writing, but the dialogic activity was described differently across levels. While dialogic activity relating to reading was ascribed across levels, dialogic activity ascribed to writing activity was largely confined to the *Umzi*. The *Umzi*, moreover, was associated with the widest range of learning activity.

3.5. University Performance: Course Marks

Second year course marks of students participating in the 2010 LKA were compared to their counterparts who did not participate in the LKA. While the overall model for Campus A (historically less privileged) ($n=1116$, with 457 participating in the course) was significant ($F=17.5$, $p<0.001$), participation in the LKA/GP was not significant. The covariate of qualification was highly significant ($p<0.0001$). The overall model for Campus B ($n=381$ with 230 participating in the course) was significant ($F=8.32$, $p<0.0001$). The effect of participating in the LKA was significant for this group ($p<0.016$), with students who had participated in the LKA achieving a 2011 average of 64% as compared to 60% for those who had not participated in the course. The covariates of qualification ($p<0.0001$) and language ($p<0.0001$) were also significant, with students having access to English at home performing better than other students. Comparable qualification cohorts were identified (students who studied toward the same degree at the same campus, where some par-

ticipated in the course and some did not). None were found in Campus B. Four comparable qualification cohorts were found within Campus A. The overall models for three of the cohorts (Bachelor of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Bachelor of Administration, Human Resource Management, and Bachelor of Science) were not significant, nor did participation in the LKA demonstrate significance. The overall model for Bachelor of Administration, Public Administration was significant ($p=0.000$, $F=6.95$). The impact of participation in the LKA is suggested to be significant ($p=0.003$). The students who had participated in the LKA/GP achieved a 2011 average of 70% as compared to 64% for those who had not participated in the course. The effect of language was also significant in this student cohort, with students speaking isiXhosa as a first language performing less well than their English counterparts ($p<0.0001$).

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Moving Beyond Activity Avoidance

Socio-cultural psychologists have done extensive work on activity avoidance, attempting to better understand the workings of motivation. They suggest that whether a human being is actively engaged or more passively motivated, detached, or alienated is largely a function of the socio-cultural conditions in which they enact their lives (Ryan and Deci 2000). While high levels of motivation, curiosity and creativity appear to be a 'natural state' of healthy children from birth, the maintenance and growth of this propensity requires supportive conditions and is readily disrupted by non-supportive conditions (Ryan and Deci 2000).

Approached through the theoretical tools of activity theorists, like any activity, the activity of avoidance reflects its motive (Leontiev 1978). Bruner (1996) suggests that our narrative of 'Self' is extremely sensitive to agential encounters (1996: 36-39). Our integrated socially reasonable 'Self' requires a sense of capacity for the completion of intended acts. When we do not have agential encounters (particularly with reference to socially valued activity) we (individually and collectively) construct alternative narratives that compensate by providing us with another form of agency ('it is boring'; 'I do not

like to'; 'I am not the reading kind of person'; 'I am the verbal type, not the writing type'). This narrative shifts the motive for the activity, relegating the activity away from the domain of 'intended acts'. Un-agency with activities that are not 'intended' is less dangerous to an agential notion of 'Self'.

The history of inequitable education has made the territory even more encumbered. The three primary resources contributing to intrinsic motivation (competence, autonomy and relatedness) isolated by the work of Ryan and Deci (2000) have been distributed unequally over long periods of time. Moreover, the 'normative' expectations woven within the culture of higher education itself (implicitly held, for example, by lecturers) are calibrated less through local student praxis, and more through dispersed hegemonic higher education 'folk psychologies' calibrated to an imaginative middle class potential, extracted from local accountability. As such, the magnitude of deviance between what is 'real' and what is canonically expected is particularly wide for students who come from less advantaged educational contexts. Combined, this legacy establishes dangerous territory for a student who 'intends' again. With little access to experiences of learning autonomy to provide buoyancy, and a narrow meaning making toolkit largely reflective of hegemonic inheritances, if a student 'intends again' and does not come upon an agential encounter, she faces the dangerous psychic possibility of affirming the barely submerged dominant suggestion, 'you do not belong here'.

Pedagogical tools must be strong enough to support students across this dangerous territory. In the case of writing activity, learners pointed strongly to the tool of the LKA Journal. The LKA Journal as a pedagogical tool appears to have achieved three things simultaneously. First, it was aligned initially to students' contracted learning motive. Second, it was capable of rapidly increasing expectations for learning activity. Finally, it was able to extract the social meaning potential from the pedagogical architecture as a whole, through its expansive interactions with the critical animating propositions, the *Umzi*, and the LKA Reader.

4.2. Expanding Activity Motive

As emphasised by the work of Leontiev (1978), in order to sustain an activity over time,

the motive must either renew or expand itself through the process of the activity itself. That is, the expansion of motive is not a one-off requirement. Motive can easily re-contract unless it is continually renewed before it settles into a somewhat more static intentional state.

Once a student has taken the dangerous step away from activity avoidance, subsequent expansions appear to be dependent upon the quantity and quality of what will be referred to as 'expansive agential encounters'. An expansive agential encounter, according to student narratives, was an explicit experience of learning autonomy, associated with a competence that is both meaningful, and socially valuable. Rather than approaching competence, autonomy and relatedness as separate realms as in the work of Ryan and Deci (2000), students in this study suggest that expansive agential encounters encompass each of these elements within a common experience over time.

It is hypothesised that the motive expands over time, as a reflection of both the quantity and quality of expansive agential encounters. While inherently dynamic and nonlinear, the expansion of motive appears to have a common backbone, as illustrated in Figure 2. There ap-

pears to be several distinguishable expansive claims from the initial contracted form. The first expansion appears in the form of an early capability claim ('I can see that I am able'). The second appears in the form of an affective claim ('I like now'; 'I am interested now'). This establishes the conditions for expanding learning activity itself ('I write and read more, more fluently, more widely'). Over time, students point to expanded complementary activity ('I think more critically'; 'I communicate better'; 'I express myself'. 'I find things out') and wider notions of social participation ('I participate'; 'I step-in'). These appear to be mutually generative, and thus depicted in a cyclical relationship (See Figure 2).

The scaffolding that supports the initial move away from activity avoidance is not necessarily the same scaffolding that is capable of renewing and expanding the motive over time. A thorough discussion of the tools capable of expansion of student activity motive over time goes beyond the scope of this discussion. The study makes two overarching suggestions about the pedagogical tools in regard to their capacity to expand activity over time. First, the effectiveness of the scaffolding was not a simple reflec-

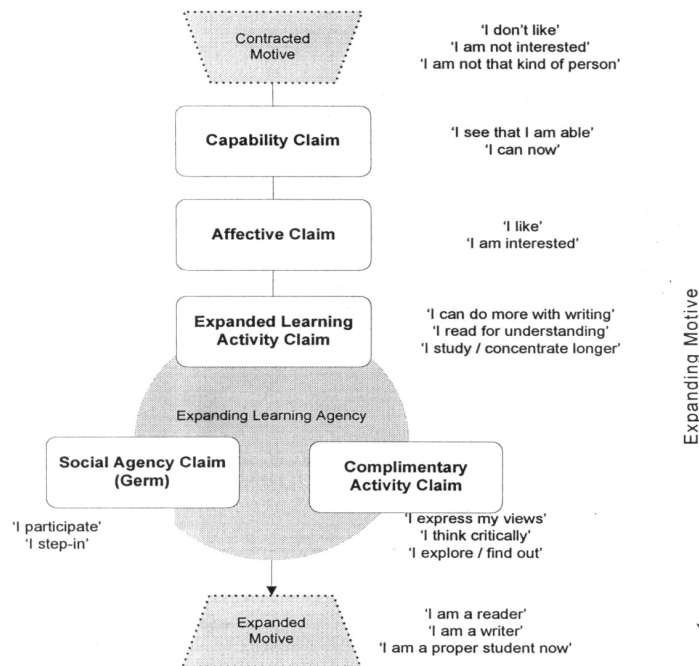


Fig. 2. Expansion of motive: Common backbone emerging

tion of the material tools, but of the meaning imbued within the material tools. Second, the ongoing transformation of activity requires tools that are capable of expanding activity motive in different ways across time. As such, it appears that one set of tools, no matter how effective, may fall short of the learning infrastructure required for the transformation of first year learning activity in this context. This study suggests that it will take a set of tools, interacting with each other in different ways at different times, to mediate more sustained expansion of student learning activity. More research is required to understand and build the conditions and tools required for first year student success in this context. This study points to four generative elements of this pedagogical architecture.

The first element is a set of tools that place value on student 'activity' itself. That is, a set of learning tools where the act of 'doing learning' is both recognised and externalised as the basis for explicit and therefore conscious reflection. This tool must be aligned to the early learning practice (in its contracted form) but able to expand to increase expectations for learning activity. The best example of this in this study was the form and meaning imbued within the 'LKA Journal'.

The second element is tools that ensure that as students start to 'do' more, they have experiences that help them expand their capacity over time. These are the many meta-cognitive tools that allow a student to self-expand over time. There is a vast and rich literature about the kinds of instructional scaffolding that provide students with stronger autonomy in relation to the transformation of their learning activity (Billmeyer 2006). This research must be mined and translated into tools that support the experience of breakthrough in a materialised form. In this experience, students pointed to the LKA Reading Log and an *Umzi* based dictionary.

The third element is a set of tools that seek to disrupt the current institutional culture, and restructure it to align better with the learning conditions conducive to first year success. Specifically, the architecture must seek to establish space where the social and academic domain becomes more integrated, providing students with more opportunities for interaction and new meaning making within this integrated domain (Tinto 1997; Astin 1993).

The final element is an expanded critical meaning making toolkit. Outside of the critical

animating propositions, it is unlikely that the pedagogical tools would have held the same pedagogical power. This symbolic toolkit provided a non-prescriptive but socially expansive meaning making potential imbued within the architecture as a whole. This study suggests that learning tools interacting with a set of symbolic tools drawn from critical theory hold generative potential for mediating first year learning success in this context. Much more research is required to understand the potential and limitations of this thesis.

4.3. A New Transformation Domain

This study contributes to the delineation of a relatively unoccupied territory of research requiring further research and theoretical elaboration. Most of the emerging South African research considering first year studies has been undertaken within historically advantaged institutions, focusing on supporting students to integrate better within institutional academic practice as currently constituted.

This study points to a different horizon. The investigation of the teaching and learning domain across three institutions in South Africa mentioned above (CHE 2010) concluded that the next generation of research must focus on the pedagogical domain from a critical perspective, moving away from placing the 'onus for change' on the student with universities making some surface-level changes to accommodate the diverse newcomers within the existing institutions status quo'. Odora Hoppers (2006) takes this further, by pointing to a more fundamental transformation agenda, especially rooted within the contradictions of so-called historically disadvantaged spaces. She suggests that higher education transformation 'needs to go beyond the reiteration of past disadvantage towards bold re-articulation of how these disadvantages can be retooled to become new points of departure'. She concludes that this both requires a 'radical critique of knowledge, its epistemology, its pedagogy or its use' and demands 'different kinds of creativity and radical innovations in pedagogy' (Odora Hoppers 2006: 53-54).

This study also points to this territory. The horizon of imagination shifts away from the 'problematic' of the 'unprepared' student, and rather assumes that placing these students at the

ontological and epistemic centre of pedagogical developments holds the compass for reconstituting the institutional landscape away from its colonial 'ivory tower' and toward a horizon both universal and local, better able to articulate with the complex learning needs of a democratic society. Said another way, this territory does not simply seek to support new students to better integrate within the current culture of higher education (to 'break them in'). Rather, it seeks to build tools to support the expansion of learning agency of first year students such that they, in turn, contribute to democratic structural elaboration over time.

5. CONCLUSION

This study suggests it is possible to transform the learning activity of first year students through carefully constructed pedagogical innovations, placing the first year student at the generative epistemic and ontological centre. It tentatively suggests that this type of learning architecture is well aligned for appropriation of students with less access to historical socio-educational learning privilege, but remains sensitive to the situated nature of historic disadvantage (for example, across campus sites.)

The study demonstrates that this pedagogical domain is complex, contested, and under-researched. While undergraduate teaching has been increasingly approached as a domain of common sense, enjoying little institutional and systemic value, this study experience re-emphasises its intellectual and theoretical complexities. There are few research networks, theoretical tools or intervention experiences through which to build tools into the future. Sustainable development in this area will require building a new intellectual project over time, capable of expanding our tools through a wide arc of intervention based research. Unless this domain becomes both re-valued and re-articulated with research, it is unlikely that the potential residing in radically reconstituted pedagogical practice will be tapped into the future.

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