The utility of a model from Activity Theory for analysing processes in the Nkosinathi Community Project

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Community project work is very complex and the psychologist's role needs careful negotiation. The psychologist may make an important contribution at the nexus of theory and practice. The Nkosinathi Project began in 1997, but gained momentum from 1999 with the regular provision of adult literacy classes, using material drawn from Constructivist approaches. The project encouraged active participation of learners and the progress of the project was continually evaluated through the explicit use of Action Research cycles. Since different theoretical approaches were being used, the integration of the strands of work in a meaningful way became a challenge, to enable an understanding of factors contributing to the success of the project. This paper will explore the utility of a model of Activity Theory as developed by Engeström, as an integrative tool. Activity Theory provides a means to consider multiple levels of activity, highlights the interaction of various factors and provides a means to consider the differing perspectives of participants in the project. The utility of this model is discussed, and potential further developments in the field are mentioned. The article also outlines key outcomes of the project and the ways in which its success has influenced the development of other initiatives.

A commonly debated issue in the field of community work relates to the role and potential contributions of psychology. de la Cancela, Alpert, Wolff and Dachs (2004) state that the "most critical role for psychologists can be to contribute to understanding of the issues and systems change possibilities inherent in healthy community efforts" (p. 178). In this article, we hope to illustrate the ways in which psychological theory enabled a deepened understanding of factors contributing to the success of a community project in South Africa. Specifically, utilising Activity Theory encouraged an interactive systemic view of the issues, and an understanding of the complexity of processes impacting on the progress of the project. Through using a diagrammatic model of activity systems developed by Engeström (1987), we were able to integrate the key findings from the qualitative data that had been gathered during the project's implementation over a two year period.

In this article, the inception of the community project and some of the features of its development will be briefly outlined before a description of Activity Theory is provided. The main aim of the article is to use Engeström's (1987) model of interacting triangles to articulate the complexity of the human activities and interactions in the project, and to discuss its utility and potential further developments from Activity Theory.

Background to the Community Project

This community project began as part of a local church initiative in a rural parish of the Midlands area of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The outreach activities of members of the church community had led to extensive communication between members of the church and leaders from a nearby impoverished community, resulting in the development of the 'Nkosinathi' ('God with us') project. The driving force for the engagement was a commitment from a core group of the churchgoers to work for greater social justice post-apartheid, and a desire for the church buildings to be more than a place of religious practice, providing resources for the people nearby.

Geographically, the area had been predominantly white-owned farmland where both mixed farming (crops and cattle) and timber plantations co-existed. It is located about 25 kilometres from the nearest city, to which people commute for supplies; with people in the area

working either on farms or at a nearby sawmill. During the political changes of the 1990's, many farm workers had moved from their former farm-based accommodation due to changes in both land-ownership and labour laws. This led to the formation of informal settlements of very basic dwellings crowded together on vacant land, often common land where there had been no prior planning for provision of water, electricity or roads. The people living in the settlement closest to the church mentioned above became involved in this project, along with some people still living on farms in the area and some based in housing provided by the sawmill.

During the period 1997-9, a process of asset-based assessment (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) was undertaken by a committee of church and community members. The following major needs were identified: land, education, income, and health care. In the former apartheid era many disenfranchised people were dependent on provisions supplied by farmer-employers, leading to a strong desire for land ownership, to enable former farm workers to use their skills for their own direct benefit. However, the community leaders recognised that to engage in the processes related to land restitution, there was first the need to increase their negotiating power and sense of agency as a group. A major contributor to making progress would be the improvement of the adults' education, since many of the people concerned had experienced only elementary education and thus had very limited or no functional literacy skills.

The church community realised that, to facilitate communication and to seek to develop the links established, they should employ a community worker who would live in close proximity to the settlement. It was during regular meetings between a group from the church, community leaders and the worker that joint goals were identified, and the idea of engaging in a literacy project developed, as an achievable short- to medium-term goal. It was hoped that this project might also lead to some people developing marketable or work-related skills, to ease the unemployment situation in the settlement.

A pilot adult literacy project started on one farm in 1997, but did not initially gain impetus because there was a lack of funding for training educators and the purchase of learner material.

Furthermore, potential participants experienced transport difficulties getting to the site after hours. At the point where little progress was being made, the project coordinator (the second author of this paper) was approached by the Nkosinathi committee for assistance, since she lived in the area. She was asked to investigate the potential involvement of the university due to her previous work on a project at the local university campus, to see whether the university could provide some of the resources necessary. It was fortuitous that when contact was made with the first author, who worked in the Faculty of Education at the time, the Research Office of the university was seeking to fund projects which worked at the interface of community development and research.

A successful funding proposal was made to the university-based fund and the first round of funding became available in 1999, to provide for adult education and training. Following the success of the first year's implementation of the project in meeting the intended goals, a second round of funding was accessed in 2000. These funds gave the project a two-year impetus: some of the funds were used for the training of literacy workers from amongst community members who had attained better levels of schooling, and the funds also provided materials for the project. Thus a partnership between the Nkosinathi project and the university was established, providing seed money for the project and opportunities to engage in researching the project's development. Because the project had become viable, in the second year the funds were supplemented in two ways: by a grant from a local charitable group in the nearby city for further materials, and the local sawmill company began making a monthly contribution towards the payment of the literacy workers.

Implementation of the Project

In this section, key features of the design of the unfolding of the project will be outlined, as a backdrop to the analysis which is the focus of this article. Three of these key features were: the preferred approach to adult education chosen by the team, the thinking skills methodology that informed the content and facilitation of the literacy programme, and the research methodology that informed the project implementation and evaluation.

Broadly in South Africa, Adult Basic

Education and Training (ABET) is the preferred approach to working with adults with limited literacy skills. This approach was supported philosophically by the national Department of Education, because of its twin aims of both educating and enabling learners to become more skilled and therefore more able to find employment. However, due to the demands on the limited budget of that department, there was no access to funds for a small-scale project such as this one. ABET has a clear empowerment agenda (Merriam & Brockett, 1997), and the project team was very concerned to see the learners develop life-skills alongside the educational process. Such concern for local functional literacy "places people at the centre of their environment and gives them the means to take an active part in community life" (from a UNESCO monograph, cited in Fordham, Holland & Millican, 1995). Whilst the acquisition of reading and writing skills has the potential to be transformative in people's lives, this is further strengthened by making strong links between learning material and the learners' social contexts.

The principles of Freire's (2006) approach to education, developed in impoverished communities in Brazil, resonate well with the philosophy of ABET. This approach emphasises the transformative nature and political empowerment of people, treating learners as competent adults (even though the goals were to learn basic reading and writing skills). Furthermore, groupwork and cooperative endeavours are encouraged to promote communication, for example collaboration between learner and facilitator regarding the topics to be covered. Freire (2006) describes the way in which the trainers should work: "From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power" (p. 109). This emphasises the important role of partnerships between educators and learners in such work.

Then, to inform the second feature of this project, a thinking skills methodology that was developed from Constructivist approaches, Thinking Actively in a Social Context (TASC) (Wallace & Adams, 1995), was chosen as a framework for the content and delivery of the literacy material. The project coordinator was familiar with TASC, having been part of the process of writing materials related to its use in teacher training. TASC was also suitable as a model because it corresponded well with the project aims which were broader than merely providing basic literacy training. TASC is soundly based in progressive ideas of cognitive skill development, and had been successfully trialled in the nearby city in the early 1990's. A problem-solving 'wheel' which uses a step-by-step approach incorporating a variety of thinking skills is central to the TASC model.

In Evans and Akhurst (1999), we describe the value of aspects of the TASC methods, including the "deliberate promotion of communication skills … encouraging learners to verbalise their ideas and the thinking processes that lead to them" (p. 4). The content of lessons is drawn directly from issues of relevance to the learners' lives, with explicit attention being given to listening, speaking, reading and writing through active participation, interaction and working with others in groups. A culture of questioning and interacting is promoted, with particular focus on both the literacy trainers' and learners' abilities to reflect upon alternatives and make conscious decisions about activities and learning materials to be used. Learners were to be encouraged to construct their knowledge collaboratively through discussion, using tools such as cognitive mapping, and reading and writing would follow using easily accessible materials such as Learn with Echo, the weekly adult education supplement from the local newspaper.

Finally, because research was central to the project from the funding perspective, Action Research was chosen for its utility for examining the unfolding of processes. This iterative approach of 'plan – act – observe – reflect' at each session had been shown to be effective in research undertaken in three other developing countries (Archer & Cottingham, 1996). Action Research has a transformative political agenda, in that it aims to de-mystify the research process, resonating with participatory principles, and incorporates the ongoing collection of evidence upon which decisions are based. Furthermore the Action Research cycles could work in

conjunction with the TASC methodology, which also uses a cyclic approach.

Weekly planning sessions between the project coordinator and literacy trainers formed part of the Action Research process. Quarterly reviews were also undertaken (including perspectives of members of the Nkosinathi Board and the university-based researcher). At various stages of the process, conference papers were presented (e.g. Evans & Akhurst, 1999), drawing on evidence collected from the learners and literacy trainers, to enable reflective opportunities and a critique of the undertaking.

Activity Theory and the 'Activity System' as a Unit of Analysis

The cultural-historical approach to learning and child development has its origins in the work of the Russian psychologist, L. S. Vygotsky. Vygotsky's work (e.g. 1962; 1978) has been expanded and developed in a number of directions by a variety of theorists. The direction of relevance to this paper is Activity Theory (AT), which owes much to one of Vygotsky's collaborators, A. N. Leont'ev (see Russell, 2004). AT draws from Vygotsky's expansion of the behaviourist notion of stimulus and response: he introduced the concept of the mediation role played by 'tools', whereby people respond to stimuli through the tools they use in activities, rather than directly (Cole, 1996). The focus of AT is therefore greater than the individual, and focuses on transactions, activities and practice (Engeström, 2005).

AT "grounds analysis in everyday life events, the ways people interact with each other using tools over time" (Russell, 2004, p. 311), and to assist in such analysis, Engeström (1987) has expanded on the subject – mediator (or tool) – object model to formulate a useful means of representing an activity system, shown in Figure 1. The basic mediational triangle (subject – tools – object), as described initially by Vygotsky, may be seen in the upper part of the diagram. This is then expanded to include the 'outcome' of the activity resulting from the actions (on the right), and further interconnected triangles between other components: the 'rules' are the norms and conventions that influence actions, the 'community' refers to the people who share a common purpose and the 'division of labour' refers to the ways in which actions are undertaken by various members of the community.

One of the values of such a representation of the activity system is that it incorporates both the "object-oriented productive aspect and the
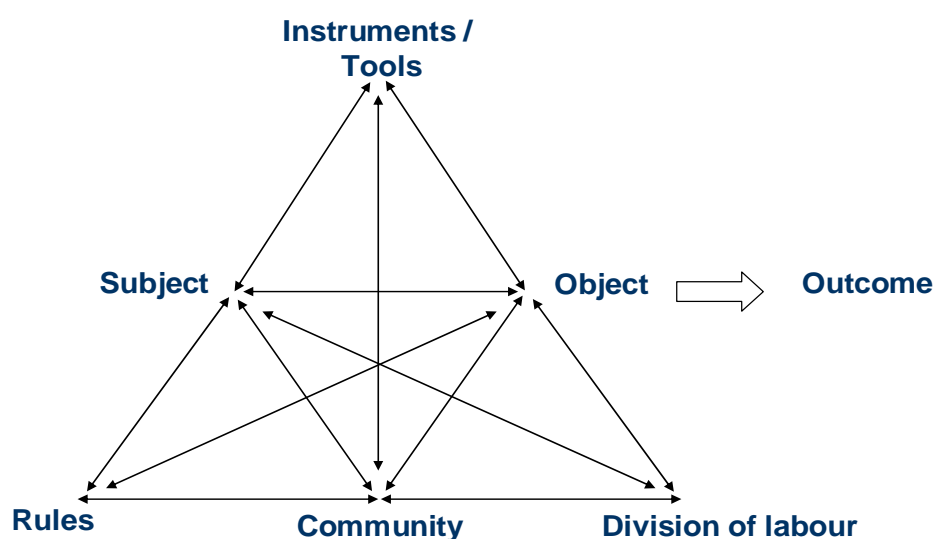

Figure 1: Engeström's (1987) expansion of Vygotsky's mediational triangle

person-oriented communicative aspect of human conduct" (Engeström, cited in Cole, 2005, p. 217). The above representation of an activity system is useful as a means to extract interactions for focus, whether tool-related, to do with people's intentions and motives or relationships. It is also a "flexible unit of analysis (theoretical lens), which allows us to train our gaze in different directions and with different levels of 'magnification' …" (Russell, 2004, p. 312). In the explanation below we hope to demonstrate the utility of this heuristic, in analysing aspects of the Nkosinathi project.

Application of the Activity System Model to the Nkosinathi Project

The above activity system triangle may be used to enable an exploration of the perspectives of the adult learners, the literacy trainers, the project coordinator and the university-based researcher. Use of these triangles incorporating details from various perspectives enables a view through different 'lenses', and illustrates the complexity of the systemic factors which were influential. In this section, illustrative quotations are also included from participants in the project (in italics); these were collected from interviews and group discussions during the ongoing evaluation. Whilst these illustrations do not

include all the stakeholders in the project (for example, members of the advisory board and employers' voices are not represented), the main participants are represented.

To begin, Figure 2 identifies the perspective of the adult learners. With reference to the top triangle in the figure, the learners (subjects) attended classes in order to improve their literacy (object), hoping that the outcome would be to read and write in their own language (isiZulu) and to develop these skills in English as well. In order to achieve this, they were exposed to the TASC-based materials as 'tools'.

The three elements of the top triangle are linked to the elements at the base of the model. A central element was the developing community of practice (the adult learners), who were introduced to and worked according to the rules of engagement (noted at the left) associated with a progressive ABET and the TASC approach, which encouraged oral participation and group interactions as the means through which learning would take place. Since the learners needed to be split into those learning in their home language, and those wanting to learn in English, this did at times lead to some tension if the two groups were brought together, since the isiZulu learners did not want to feel inferior (see one of the learner's
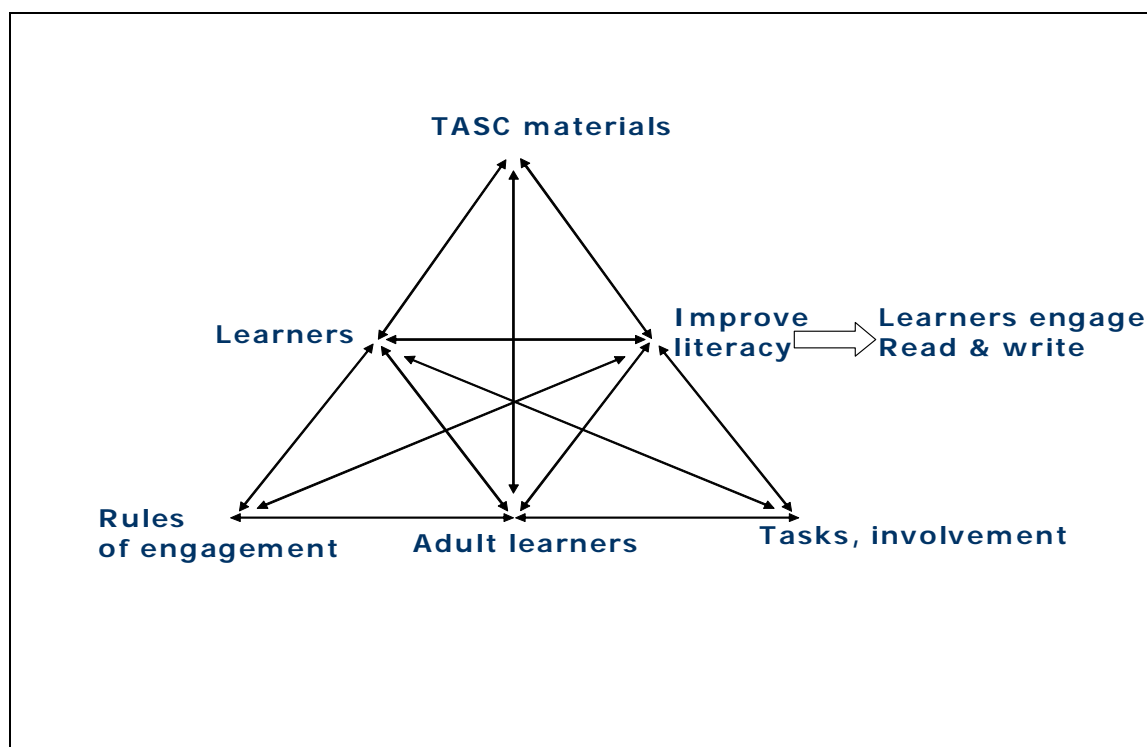

Figure 2: The Activity System model for the adult learners

excerpts below). The tasks (at the right) were designed to have relevance to their everyday lives and needs, thus being of intrinsic interest and led to learner involvement, and the value of these is emphasized in some of the learner responses below.

The following excerpts from interviews with learners illustrate what the learners said of their experiences in the first months:

- *We think all are getting somewhere. We like to be asked for our opinion.*
- *Everyone wanted to have a thought and to voice out some points. This we like very much.*

The group learning in isiZulu said of their achievements (outcomes):

- *Even in Zulu I didn't know how to do anything. How to write words ... write clearly. Now I can ask and answer questions ... Many things ...*
- *Now I learn a bit of English – date of birth and ID.*
- *Now I can read a newspaper, write a letter, write the date – all these things.* (Translated)

One participant said the best part was:

- *To read and write, and I was also trying to speak but not perfect – specially I had a problem of using tenses such past, and future tense.*

Another said the best part was:

- *I am able to leave spaces and use capitals properly. I am able to see directions round my home, like 'Kranskop' (a road sign) – before I didn't know this words.*

However, the worst part for this learner related to the community of practice:

- *When we learnt with the higher levels doing English ... They might laugh ... When they were discussing things – we didn't want to do it.*

One said the course would be improved by:

- *having books with me to keep on revision after hours.*

Some extra comments from participants:

- *Since I attended this adult schools I have learn to communicate a person, to give person direction ...learn even to separate metres and kilometres.*
- *I know how much important to introduce a person, even myself. The teacher... by*

working like a breakdown ... she pulled us from scrap.

In the last comment the learner is alluding to the thinking skill of making thoughts and plans explicit, and to the sense of personal improvement that has resulted. When asked 'where else did you read or write outside of the class?' a number spoke about being able to decode traffic signs, illustrating that a lesson had relevance and that visual literacy was increasing. There were indications that transfer of learning was taking place.

The value of the approach to learning is summed up in one learner's comment related to the participation (rules):

- *I think this is real learning – if we (had) had this at school I think this country would be much different now.*

Another learner (who is also a shop steward) spoke about the impact of the learning on his role at work:

- *I even put myself in management's shoes – when they see 'production' I see 'the workers' ... now I try to understand what they are saying.*

The activity system triangle in Figure 2 may be expanded to include the literacy trainers' perspective. In Figure 3 below, the additional features are added in bold and italics, to enable the views to be considered together. The literacy trainers, whilst sharing the objective of the learners' improving literacy, have their own objectives: the development of their own training skills. This was enabled through the funding of their attendance at various certificate courses in the city, and their weekly preparation meetings with the project coordinator. Their hopes were that developing these skills might improve their own employability (and this has been an outcome for some of them, since a number are now employed in that capacity, whilst others have moved on to other employment). The rules of engagement were similar to those of the adult learners (since these trainers also formed their own community of practice), but their tasks and involvement were to access resources for use, to prepare material, facilitate group-work and pass on their skills and expertise to the learners.

Figure 3 shows the interaction of the two activity systems, represented through the differences in detail of some of the elements.
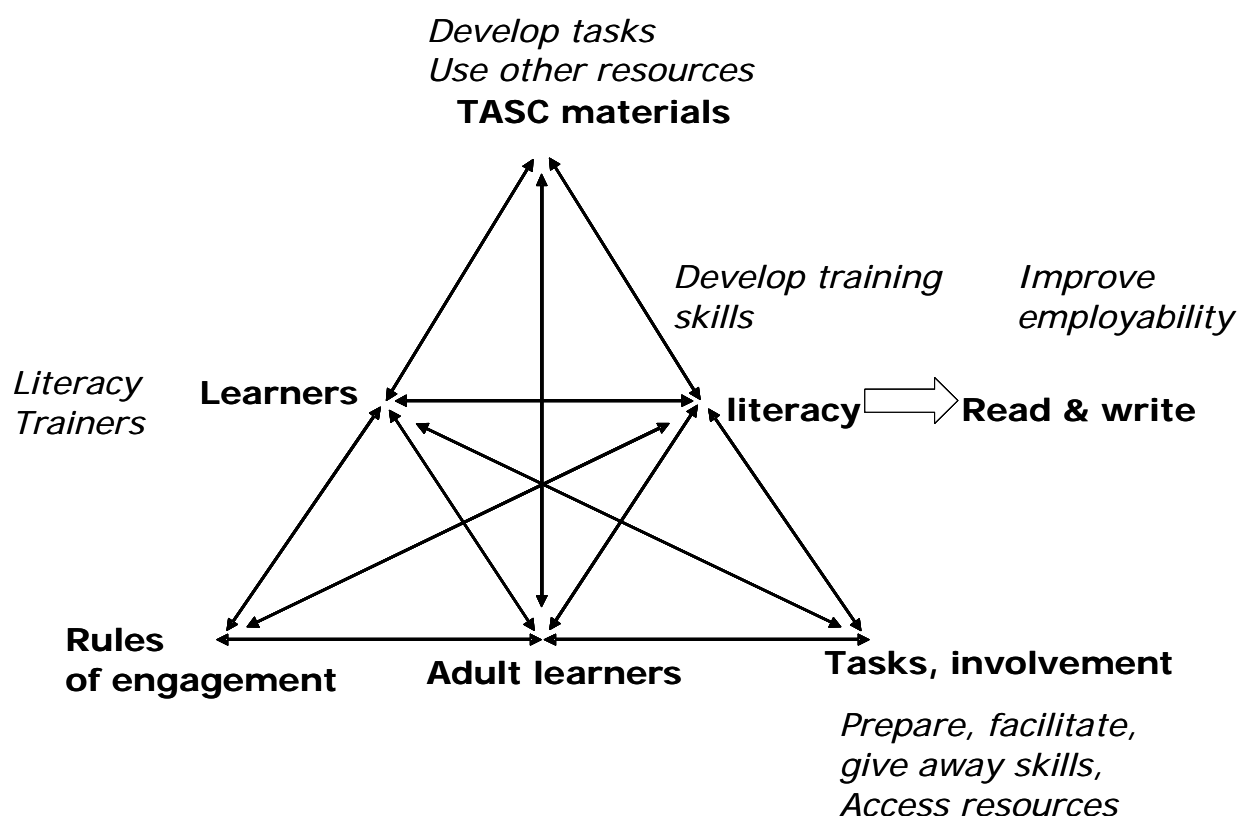
Develop tasks
Use other resources
TASC materials

Develop training
skills

Improve
employability

Literacy
Trainers   **Learners**   **literacy** ⟹ **Read & write**

Rules
of engagement   **Adult learners**   **Tasks, involvement**

Prepare, facilitate,
give away skills,
Access resources

Figure 3: The Activity System model for the adult learners and literacy trainers

However, these different elements did not appear to be in conflict with one another, hence a 'working together' of the elements to enable the activities to progress. The acknowledgement of these differences is important in order to articulate mutual benefits to members of the two systems, and to sustain the commitment and motivation of the literacy trainers who were central to the successful delivery of the materials.

Two early comments from the trainers about the materials and approach were:

- *Some were struggling, we must adapt and make it relevant;*
- *But the people were free – they enjoyed it.*

The interaction of the two systems is illustrated by the dialogue below. In it, the value of the literacy trainers' understanding of the motivation and need to encourage the learners, as well as their sensitivity to the cultural nuances of the community is illustrated. This dialogue between the project coordinator (Q), and the trainers (T1 & T2)

occurred after the project has been underway for a couple of weeks, with numbers growing each week and the concomitant difficulties in planning and the time consumed whilst orientating new learners to the approach to be used.

Q. *Can we close registration now, do you think, as it is making our planning and organising very difficult?*

T1. *They would be discouraged. They are coming in their own time … People from our society … it's part of being illiterate – they don't understand the other things …*

Q. *Can we not explain that they can register again in July, after six months?*

T1. *Let the mistakes be done by them, not us. We show them this is an organised thing – we are serious, so let them come. I'm impressed with these people – it was raining and they came, no complaints.*

T2. *Most of them as the year goes on will see the need, and we will see who drops out. They have to come by themselves. We must do everything for them, get the transport and give the lessons. We must be committed to them …*

The above excerpt illustrates the value of a culturally sensitive approach to community engagement. The comments about the rain were made in a context where dirt roads become very muddy and difficult for people who may be walking a distance. Transport was a variable that impacted on attendance on a number of occasions, since meetings were sometimes held at the same time at the sawmill, leading to the driver being otherwise occupied.

It was interesting to note the ways in which the trainers were utilizing the TASC thinking skills more broadly than in the lessons alone. One of the trainers, also a lay preacher noted:

> - *Even out of classes I find myself using them. I was preparing my sermon for Sunday and I found myself using 'In someone else's shoes'. My point was about Jesus telling the people that to enter his kingdom they must become like little children – see things from the point of view of a child.*

In a focus group discussion, another trainer said:

> - *We can think creatively ... I look all around ideas. I challenge myself and ideas from both sides ... It has taught me to use my mind.*

The central role played by the literacy trainers must be emphasized. The personality, dedication and competence of the facilitators is one of the important factors in the success of any adult literacy project. The degree to which the facilitator is prepared to shift control to the learners and work in a co-operative as opposed to an authoritarian style appears to correlate highly with learner satisfaction, and is also important for modeling democratic behaviour in community affairs. The early investment in their training had given the project credibility. The trainers were praised by learners for their fluency in English, punctuality and competence as facilitators. The risk to the project was that the trainers might find other, more lucrative, employment, but this did not affect the project in the two years under consideration (and although this did occur at a later stage, this was seen as a part of the empowerment of the participants).

In the first month or two, attendance was up to and over 50 per class, thus the two trainers would work in isiZulu with smaller groups, and the project coordinator was needed to work with the smaller group who wanted to learn in English. Initially, then, the project coordinator took on a dual role, working both as a literacy trainer and as facilitator of the trainers' meetings. At a later stage in the project, further trainers were recruited, enabling her to do the coordination and conduct some of the research.
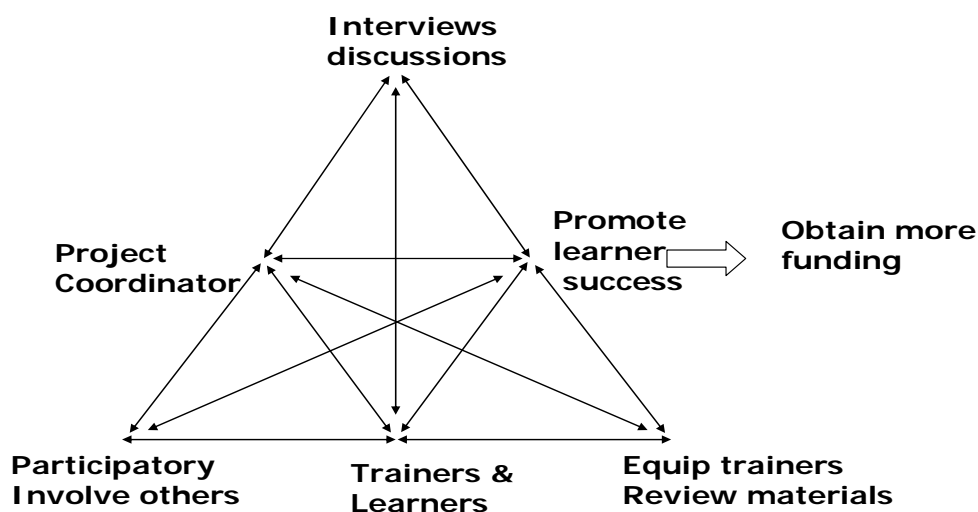
Figure 4 represents the activity system

Figure 4: The activity system model for the project coordinator

from the perspective of the project coordinator. The main object was to promote learner success through her engagement with the literacy trainers on a weekly basis, and by ongoing communication with the learners, including the gathering of data to contribute to the research process. Overall, it was important to enable the project to gather momentum and reach a point (in terms of the number of learners successfully achieving progress and the capacity-building of trainers) where access to funds from organizations (either governmental or charitable) could facilitate the establishment of the project in a longer term way. It was also vital that modeling of the collaborative and systematic communicative style of ABET and TASC was evident in her engagements with both the trainers and the learners. The trainers' meetings involved both enabling the trainers to utilise the training they had received, and the gathering and sharing of materials (as represented by the elements at the base of the triangle).

Figure 5 overlays, in bold and italics, the engagement of the university-based researcher who had accessed the funds for the project. Her object was to make sure that evidence was gathered and the process was underpinned by research methodology in order to produce the outcomes required by the funding body. Her contributions to the quarterly review meetings were to continue in the participatory spirit of the project, assist with data analysis and provide theoretical and reflective input. Away from the project context, she also generated reports and conference proposals/papers for academic audiences, which in the short term enabled the second year's funding to be successfully acquired, and in the medium term provided the evidence base to enable applications for more sustained funding to go ahead.

The interaction between the project coordinator and university researcher is highlighted at the interface of their differing, but complementary, activities shown at the element nodes in Figure 5. This was facilitated by the mutual recognition of the differing contributions being made by each, and contributed to the continuation of the project work.

The figures above and their associated descriptive narratives illustrate the utility of the activity system model to enable and highlight interactions and differences in the activities of the people involved in the Nkosinathi project.
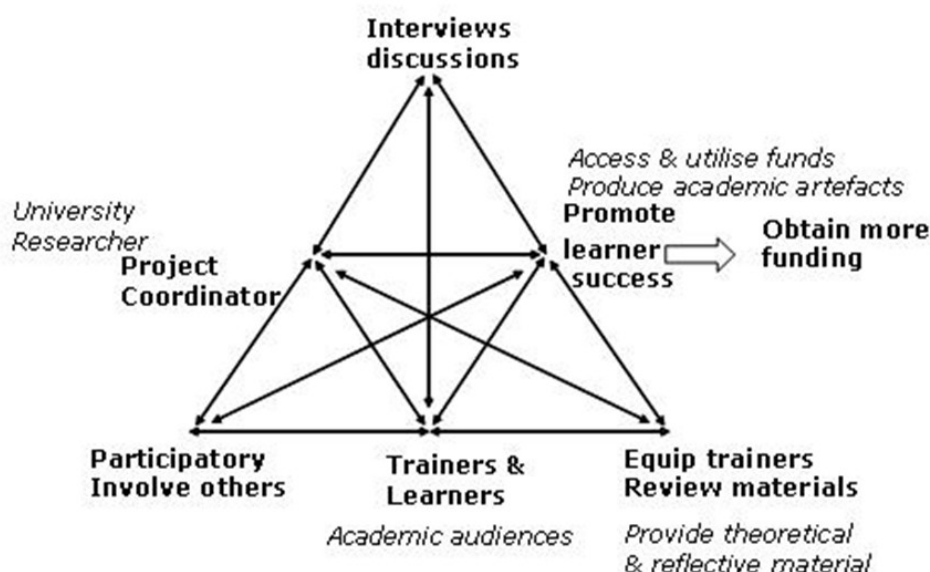

Figure 5: The activity system model for the project coordinator and the researcher

Whilst in the case of this project, the confluence of the differing objectives and outcomes enabled the continuation and success of the project (summarized in the following section), it is clear that the differences found when expanding on each of the elements of the model might also enable the articulation of tensions and barriers to progress within systems. For example, the philosophy shared by both the researcher and project coordinator led to each working as equal partners in the project, due to the recognition and appreciation of the contributions of the other. Clear communication during negotiations and mutual decision-making enabled this to occur. This was also the case in the more frequent weekly interactions between the coordinator and trainers. Had communication at these levels been complicated by mistrust, unarticulated expectations or unwillingness of participants to take up and deliver on agreed responsibilities, the results may have been very different. A further crucial factor appeared to be the equipping of learners and trainers to articulate their thinking and to see that their contributions were valued and important to the project's overall success.

It must be noted that the representation of activity systems above is not exhaustive. Further systems could have been drawn for other slightly more distal stakeholders, for example the employers, Board members and funders. Further 'layering' of the activity systems could lead to other comparisons and confluences becoming evident, enabling greater articulation of the variety of perspectives.

Outcomes of the Project

Comments about the impact of the project were gathered periodically, and the following, from the Human Resources officer at the sawmill, are illustrative of the progress made by some of the learners:

- *I have noticed some people, especially Mr C ... he can understand what's going on in meetings better than before. What impressed me the other day, he always was one that was thumb-printing, and now he's signing his name, which is wonderful to me.*
- *(There is) a big improvement in her*

paperwork – wage records, concentration. She used to do quite a lot of mistakes, but now she is better and accepting more responsibility.
- *The driver, he is more open to talk – it's increased his confidence.*
- *As I am sitting with some of them in village committee meetings and shop stewards meetings I have noticed that they show great improvement in communicating their ideas.*

Some illustrative case studies were collected as evidence (in Evans &Akhurst, 1999), but space precludes the inclusion of details of these. However, some short excerpts from these are:

1. Learner A, after eight months' attendance at Nkosinathi, can read, write and speak English confidently enough for his own purposes. He had never been to school. He is now a leader in the youth congregation of a Sunday School. He said: *Now I know how to read and write. To read and write means I can look after myself in life. I can rule myself. After a further 6 months as a learner he wrote: in this year I learnt many things. I learnt how to write a project, debate, take time to think ... think broadly.*

2. Learner B was able to reduce literacy classes to once a week. On another evening she co-ordinates and helps to run sewing classes for local women in the community. She collects money, makes out receipts, and helps to market products made by the group. Thus she has been instrumental in getting other projects off the ground. She only passed Grade 4 as a child.

3. Learner C, who could speak very little English and who struggles to read and write, is a mechanic on a local farm. Yet he has stood for and been elected to the farm school's governing body as chairman. He attends classes regularly in order to improve his English so that he does not feel inferior to the school teachers on the governing body who are all highly literate and can therefore intimidate him.

4. Learner D was unemployed, and had only attended school to grade 2. After passing level 1, she also enrolled in an early childhood Educare course, and started working with five children in a voluntary capacity. She was able to stand up in a community meeting and speak confidently about the importance of pre-school education.

She notes: *This is my future ... I can learn more. I can help all the children.*
5. Others stated that they could now 'help their own children', 'greet their employer in English' and that they thought it 'might even help them to find jobs or get promoted'.

By 2001, the following results were directly related to this project: six jobs were created; community members were trained, both as literacy facilitators and to take on other roles in this list; employment projects were started, including sewing and carpentry classes, vegetable gardening and the training of some of the learners in word processing and other computer-related skills; an Early Childhood Education centre was established, and the carers from the community were trained by drawing from the project funds; links were established with a district clinic, and there was information dissemination and training provided for two volunteers in the provision of home-based care for HIV/AIDS.

Each of the above-mentioned outcomes developed further after 2001. The project had gained a momentum of its own, and this coupled with the ongoing success of the learners in examinations, led to funding being granted from the provincial education department to pay for some of the teachers' salaries. Members of the expanded project team also made links with other Adult Education providers, and access to other funds for the development of skills was facilitated.

It is important to highlight the enabling mechanisms and elements that contributed to the success of the project. As noted earlier in the previous section, the commitment and persistence of the ABET trainers and the learners played a central role. Furthermore, the proximity and willingness of the project coordinator was crucial. She gave of her time and expertise voluntarily, only claiming recompense for travel expenses and materials. Thus the major 'players' were very much a part of the local community. Then, the source of the initiative in the local church must be acknowledged, and the usefulness of the church building (for no fee) as a central venue was also important. The Nkosinathi Board, comprising church members, community leaders and the community worker, worked actively 'behind the scenes', and the success of the project led to enhanced trust that the group were committed to delivery. This in turn led to improved communication.

Discussion

In this paper, the utility of activity system models to enable reflection on the interaction of roleplayers in the Nkosinathi Project has been demonstrated. This has led to an understanding of the confluence of factors that contributed to the success of the project. A limitation is that the expansion of aspects of the project using the tools of AT happened post hoc, rather than as a part of the ongoing Action Research evaluative cycles. More recently, at the conference of the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research, in Seville, Spain (2005), there were a number of examples of researchers utilising the model in active discussion with the community with which they were working. The models may prove to be useful tools for discussions, in communities of practice, about the interactions between activity systems, potential conflict points and tensions.

In the past decade, Engeström and his colleagues have worked extensively with the activity systems triangles described in this article. However, there have also been further model developments, to enable closer links to be made with Action Research. The most recent model to be proposed is the 'expansive learning cycle' (Engeström, 1999), and this may prove to have utility for community engagement.

From the point of view of the role of the psychologist in a project such as this, I hope the article has illustrated the way in which a theoretical lens may be used to enhance understanding of the interaction of various factors. This perhaps partially answers the question raised about how psychologists can "remain relevant and contribute to the profession by pioneering and reinventing praxis responsive to social change?" (de la Cancela, et al., 2004, p. 156). In this project, research was integrated into the process, and the associated reviews and analytical work were utilised as input into the next phase of the project. The reports and research papers that were developed were used as leverage to access further funding, thus leading to a direct benefit back into the project.

Other principles of community psychology

were also inherent in the project design, including the participatory and cooperative approach taken, and the empowerment of participants. Rozensky, Johnston, Goodheart, & Hammond (2004) note that "psychology builds a health(ier) world by enhancing the positive interplay of the individual and his or her personal, local, and global environment" (p. xx), and the outcomes of the project in terms of the benefits to participants have been noted above.

Reflecting on the project from the perspective of the provision of literacy to adult learners, one of the factors that have plagued other projects has been the high drop-out rate reported. In Evans & Akhurst (1999) we noted that: "we learnt that we had to provide the best service, the most encouragement, acceptance, despite difficulties of organisation, i.e. put no obstacles in the way of those wanting to come". There is no doubt that the levels of motivation and enthusiasm shown by the project coordinator and the trainers were important contributory factors that could not easily be measured. This project was also based firmly in learning theory, and we believe this was a further important factor. It would be valuable to reflect on the pragmatics of the integration of the TASC methodology with the methods of training used in adult education in further reflection on the work. A further positive political factor was the presence of an accredited system of assessment provided by an independent body, but supported by the South African Government's Ministry of Education, which was accessible to the project and found to be encouraging to the learners.

Finally, this project underlines the social justice roles that may be played by university systems. In an era where much management and funding is ruled by the principles of employability and economics, it is valuable to have an example of university-related work contributing to community development. This project is a small example of the sort of work described by Fryer & Fagan (2003) where community members and middle class research allies can work in solidarity to successfully bring about at least limited social change, reducing a little of the impact of poverty. Crick (cited in Annette, 2005, p. 333), notes that universities "are part of society and, in both senses of the word, a critical part which should be playing a major role in the wider objectives of creating a citizenship culture". Whereas there are many universities with widening participation agendas, there appear to be fewer voices calling for reciprocal engagement. Active community psychology has the potential to be one of the vehicles for such engagement in social justice, engaging people excluded by poverty and limited education in emancipatory understanding and enhancing their potentials to transform the quality of their lives.

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