Chapter 8
From Practice to Theory: Participation as Learning in the Context of Sustainable Development Projects

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8.1 Introduction

This chapter starts with an autobiographical account of my experience of creating communication programmes within sustainable development projects in rural Africa. It charts the evolution of a participatory approach before turning to investigations into the way people learn in such settings. I then apply the resulting view of learning as a complex process of dialogue primarily relying on known and trusted sources to other rural communication programmes. Noting that accounts of these projects have largely relied on empirical evidence, the second part of the chapter represents a search for appropriate theoretical underpinning. I show that the concepts of *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) and *legitimate peripheral participation* are relevant to the project experience, while possible limitations in these approaches are tackled by the application of *cultural-historical activity theory* (CHAT). In conclusion, I note that the principles of situated learning and activity theory resonate strongly with real-world examples of education for sustainable development and suggest that although hitherto separate, they might become more closely aligned – albeit with a few words of caution.

8.2 Background

I never liked 'theory'. I wanted to make a difference, so I went into the world to *do* something. Of course, one wants to do things well and like so many practitioners before me, I found myself *thinking* about what we were doing. And so, from being

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stuck on a rainforest track, scratching mosquito bites, I found myself starting to wade into theory, barely noticing the sleet on the library windows.

In writing this chapter, I have tried to make sense of these two worlds. Happily, the subject matter itself has helped me to understand that these are not two worlds at all. Starting points are always problematic; rather than beginning with a theoretical tradition, I have chosen to start my story in a time and place where I was most isolated from literature, whilst developing rural communication programmes in an increasingly participatory manner. After a foray into the world of research, the story returns to 'the field' where more ideas are put into action. The chapter concludes with an attempt to identify concepts that underpin these experiences of participation and learning. I have deliberately chosen to write in a style that reflects my perspective as 'practitioner looking at theory', rather than that of an academic researching practice.

8.3   Uganda 1991: Common Sense(s)

The Mount Elgon Conservation and Development Project was a joint venture of the Government of Uganda and IUCN, The World Conservation Union. They hired me (with a background in environmental education) as the Education/Extension Advisor. The project aimed to protect the threatened Forest Reserve (now a National Park) while supporting sustainable rural development among the 230,000 people living around the forest. The *Terms of Reference* for my involvement in the project focused on raising awareness, disseminating information, and training others to support the project aims.

As a trained teacher, it seemed self-evident or common sense that the best way to learn would be to encourage people to develop their own ideas and solutions rather than to present blueprints. The top-down education programme prescribed by the project document was quickly upended to become a programme of 'finding out', with the awareness-raising component shifting away from conveying information and towards placing ideas and suggestions into dialogue and debate.

Among our six strong senior team, there were conflicting views; it appeared that our common sense was not actually common to all of us. Our arguments revealed the tensions between project management with its concern for measurability and 'rigour', and the apparently haphazard human development processes taking place in our project area. Whilst we all wished to conserve biological diversity, there was resistance to the notion of a diversity of solutions arising from engagement with the numerous communities living around the protected area. This took place before the term 'participation' had found its way into every pore of the development world.

The context of the education programme

Education had the smallest budget on the project, most of which had been pre-designated to producing materials. The project area was remote and mountainous and literacy rates were low, particularly among the youth – a function of isolation and years

of civil unrest. Against this, the thirst for knowledge and self-improvement was immense.

In attempting to promote sound environmental behaviour, it was striking how everyone wanted to educate everyone else. Among the local elite there was no shortage of offers to host meetings or place posters in villages. Meanwhile, in more remote settlements, we were providing people's first physical contact with media such as dramas, posters, and leaflets.

After 18 months, we evaluated the impact of our communication programme. We discovered that people were grateful for our efforts but virtually no new messages had been learned from them. Any behaviour change had been a reaction to the threat of an armed 'task force' of forest guards. However, people *were* learning about the possibility of developing drama or posters because the project had introduced them.

Handing over the tools of communication

Our next step was to reorient our programme so that the materials could be produced by the very communities who would 'consume' them; in this way, the language of 'target audiences' became redundant in favour of 'participants'.

By describing our approach as *gradually diminishing control* (a term borrowed from language instruction), we imbued an apparently haphazard, exploratory process of media development with a pseudoscientific aura. This helped to 'sell' the approach to our critical community at national and international level, that is, those who monitored our budgets.

Around this time, the education team attended a workshop facilitated by a British artist and author, Bob Linney. This gave us the practical tools and confidence to pursue our bottom-up approach. Bob differentiated between *participatory* approaches (as if people must be invited to participate in their own development) and *people-centred* approaches where people carry out communication activities according to their own agenda (Linney 1995).

By taking media production to communities, we were able to tap the goodwill of volunteers while giving groups of local people opportunities to explore their own issues, albeit in the context of conservation and development. The thinking was simple: as any advertising agency knows, to distil a complex issue into a snappy slogan requires a great deal of analysis. Why confine this learning to the educated project staff? Surely, the analysis had better be undertaken within the community so that local people can appreciate the complexity of the issue.

Posters were designed and screen-printed in remote villages and when an official complained that they were meaningless outside the project area, we remarked that our glossy English posters, which graced the Government offices in Kampala, were meaningless inside the project area.

Drama shows, telling local (sometimes subversive) stories, were developed and performed widely, and radio programmes, with carefully timed schedules of songs, interviews, and stories, were recorded and broadcast on local language services.

The people involved gained a deeper understanding of key issues through the process of 'reducing' them, and became more media savvy in the process. Others living in the project area experienced a media campaign that reflected their own lives. A further spin-off was that the project learned about local perspectives on conservation and development issues.

Initially, this participatory approach was at odds with the project's top-down conservation work. This changed when an external evaluation mission noted the disconnected nature of the project's activities; good participatory practice was being encouraged elsewhere (Chambers 1983) and our project model should follow suit. A *collaborative forest management* approach was suggested and the project was redesigned with the assistance of experts in participatory rural appraisal. Participation was official.

8.4 Looking into Learning

Returning to England, I directed a European Union-funded research project called *ECoSA: Education and Communication for Sustainability in Africa* (Vare 1998). The *Terms of Reference* called for 'an investigation of needs', but rather than simply canvass environmental educators for their opinions (which we did), we also conducted qualitative research in Uganda, Mali, and Mozambique with the aim of gaining insights into 'environmental learning' which might help organisations to communicate environmental issues in a more meaningful manner.

In a separate piece of research (Vare 1997), I conducted interviews in the UK and compared this with the ECoSA data. This led to the identification of four categories of learning sources:

- Own observation
- Known and trusted people
- Other human beings
- Mass media

The study highlighted the extent to which people 'own' their learning and remember experience over instruction. Thus one's *own observation* appears to be most significant followed by *known and trusted people* (often friends or family, people who share many of the 'filters' of class, culture, prejudice, etc. with the subject). The category of *other human beings* ranges from teachers to self-help groups to chance encounters. Perhaps surprisingly, *mass media* appears least effective. On reflection, I would term this *remote media*, because the common feature of this category is that communication is always one-way. My review of learning theories at this time went only as far as cognitive theories such as Kolb's learning cycle and Honey and Mumford's learning styles (Rogers 1986). Interesting though these are, they do not explain *social* learning processes, or reveal why one-way communication can be so ineffective.

In all this research, the impact of schooling is surprisingly hard to locate; this should be of great concern in settings where scarce family resources are spent on

school fees. The 'crisis of relevance' in terms of many African curricula has been documented (Pennycuick 1993) but the ECoSA data suggest that schooling, with its emphasis on instruction and rote learning, interrupts the *processes* through which people traditionally gain their skills and knowledge.

With the demise of processes such as participation in everyday tasks and story-telling around the fire (Tobayiwa 1988), it is small wonder that one of my key observations was that *environmental education is the education you miss by going to school*.[1] The ECoSA survey put it thus (Vare 1998:11):

> [T]o some extent school has failed to *replace* many useful elements of the traditional learning which it has helped to *displace*.

This observation provides an interesting re-interpretation of the term: 'participation in schooling'. This is not a question of school attendance, but one of balancing opportunities to encounter new ideas with participation in the child's 'real world'. I shall return to this point later.

8.5   What's it All About? Part 1. Looking for Theories

In conducting these investigations, I considered a number of potentially binding concepts: these included *power* (Foucault 1984), *conscientization* (Freire 1968) and *participation* in relation to both of these (Chambers 1997). I also encountered Rahnema's (1992) critique of the various motives for groups appropriating the term 'participation'.[2] This chimed with personal observations of participation being applied in a mechanistic manner on conservation projects. This is 'participation as funding requirement' – a mode that is alive and well today.

To understand the extent to which people 'do' participation, I used a typology developed for the rural development context by Jules Pretty (1993); this has parallels with Hart's 'ladder of participation' (Hart 1997; see Chapter 2 by Roger Hart, this volume). Pretty's stages range from *passive participation*, where people are told what will happen, to *self-mobilisation* where people take initiatives independent of external institutions. This 'highest level' is not participation in the project sense; people constantly make decisions for themselves anyway. I would consider the highest level of participation to be *negotiation*, where power is balanced to the extent that no party can succeed in meeting its own objectives without achieving consensus, or at least the willing compliance of the other parties. In terms of my work on the project in Uganda, this was unlikely to be achieved as the Government agencies responsible for the National Park were by far the dominant party.

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[1] This does not mean that I would advocate a return to some pre-industrialised idyll. Keeping children at home as domestic helpers while their mothers labour in the fields does not maximise human potential.

[2] This included the Rahnema quotation that was circulated to the contributors of this volume as an initial stimulus, noted on p.v of the preface.

Without further theorising, this period of research had at least led me to a view of learning characterised by two principles:

- Regardless of what is taught, people will learn in an idiosyncratic and serendipitous way and remember the aspects that uniquely have meaning for them – it is not that they *want* to learn only about things which are relevant or over which they have some agency – but these are the things that they *will* learn best.
- Learning is achieved through *dialogue*, whether with human or non-human entities – again, the more familiar/relevant the learning source, the more effective the learning episode.

8.6   Ideas into Action

Armed with these principles, I developed rural communication programmes in Ghana and Tanzania that relied on hundreds of conversations among friends and neighbours initiated by volunteers. The issues raised by these conversations were 'harvested' regularly and responded to through local meetings with project workers who had a community liaison function (Vare 2001).

In Ghana, the volunteers were called *field walkers* and in Tanzania we used the term *washirika* (a Swahili word that describes those whom we trust and with whom we cooperate). The washirika approach included 'trust mapping', through which groups formed and selected their volunteers rather than simply relying on geographical proximity to define groups as we had done in Ghana.

Both of these programmes were developed during short consultancies to conservation projects, and neither was sustained beyond two years because they fell foul of the projects' imperatives to:

- Produce materials that clearly disseminate conservation messages
- Resolve conservation/development conflicts in a project-limited time-span
- Match the activity to budget lines that had been determined before the project started

It is unusual to find a project in the natural resource management field that is prepared to invest in anything other than 'instrumental participation', that is, participation with a specific end-point in mind, such as the establishment of a community-based management committee, in a limited time frame. The rush for 'product over process' is endemic in projects, largely as a result of rigid funding cycles – 'the chains that bind' (Marsden *et al*. 1994). Where project personnel do not advocate flexibility, adherence to pre-determined objectives can stifle the innovation and creativity that meaningful participation could engender.

Most of these consultancies were conducted while I worked for the Living Earth Foundation. Living Earth is a non-governmental organisation, whose own project teams are encouraged not to view people as objects of change, but to assist them in becoming agents of their own change. Rather than specifying particular behavioural

outcomes for its projects, Living Earth defines its goals in terms of *action competence* (Jensen and Schnack 1997) (see also Chapter 4 by Simovska, Chapter 10 by Breiting, and Chapter 11 by Schnack, this volume). This concept defines *action* carefully as the result of the actor's own decision, made with a change perspective. Consequently, Living Earth aims to develop in people the skills, knowledge, motivation, and self-confidence necessary to take decisions in a given context.

I witnessed a striking example of this when visiting teacher-led projects inspired by Fundación Tierra Viva, Living Earth's partner in Venezuela. At one school, teachers explained how they had transformed a rubbish tip into a playground; this had stopped vandalism and provided a valuable community resource. When asked what they personally had learned from the project, they replied, 'We can't say exactly what we have learned, but right now, we feel anything is possible.' They had action competence.

Despite many successes, organisations like Living Earth have their own sustainability problem. Institutional donors and corporate partners do not normally fund open-ended learning processes – they may expect 'participation', but their funding is tied to specific economic, social, and environmental objectives. The challenge lies in achieving these objectives while building a durable legacy in terms of learning. Analysing this kind of development is critical because donors tend to fund what they can measure. The participatory activities, I have discussed, have largely relied on empirical evidence; to date they have not benefited from a sound theoretical underpinning. Securing a rigorous basis from which to analyse project learning and participatory activity is not just a theoretical issue – it is a means of survival.

8.7   What's it All About? Part 2. Finding Theories

From the preceding section, one could expect links to many theoretical traditions and alternative views of learning. An analysis of *approaches to learning* by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC 2004) provides an overview of some options:

- *The associative perspective*: views learning as acquiring competence [not necessarily action competence]
- *The constructive perspective* (*individual focus*): views learning as achieving understanding – learners actively construct new ideas by building and testing hypotheses [resembles Living Earth's application of action competence]
- *The constructive perspective* (*social focus*): views learning as achieving understanding – learners actively construct new ideas through collaborative activities and/or through dialogue [parallels with *participatory learning and action*, Pretty *et al*. 1995]
- *The situative perspective*: views learning as social practice – learners develop their identity through participation in specific communities and practices (source: JISC 2004:13) [my notes added in square brackets]

ESD will involve a combination of all these approaches, although in my experience, the dominant discourse on learning in ESD is that of *learning as acquisition* viewed as an

individual cognitive function. The first two perspectives in the typology are most commonly encountered therefore, even among projects focusing on social change. However, the last two approaches in the typology offer promising, socially constructed views of knowledge that relate to participatory development goals. *Situative learning* is singled out for investigation later because it has particular resonance with the issues raised in my preceding account of project experience.

8.8   Learning as Dialogue: The Zone of Proximal Development

The conceptual roots of situated learning lie in Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD (Rieber and Carton 1987:209). This could be summed up as the distance between that which we *already* know and that which we *could* know given collaboration with a more experienced other. Collaboration, or dialogue, is therefore seen as an essential component of learning. This explains the strength of the field-walker/washirika communication programmes that are founded on the notion of dialogue with known and trusted people. By giving volunteers an induction and regular access to project personnel, they inevitably became better informed individuals who could develop increased understanding of issues among their peers.

Lave and Wenger (1991) recognise that there are various interpretations of the ZPD but they see it as a zone of *social* rather than simply individual development, preferring Engeström's definition of the zone as (Lave and Wenger 1991:49):

> [The] distance between the everyday actions of individuals and the historically new form of the societal activity that can be collectively generated as a solution to the double bind potentially embedded in everyday actions.

That which we know as a society, grows from that which we already know as individuals, much of which we learned through our interaction with society. This also helps to solve the 'learning paradox' faced by an acquisition-view of learning, i.e. 'how can we want to acquire a knowledge of something that is not yet known to us?' (Sfard 1998:7).

In the field-walker/washirika programmes, there is an acceptance, even an expectation, that what is learned will be modified through the dynamic interactions among residents, volunteer field walkers, and the project staff. This supports Vygotsky's notion of socially constructed knowledge (Tryphon and Voneche 1996), but the ZPD concept does not fully address the deeply complex nature of this process unless we delve deeper into a view of the zone as one of social development.

8.9   Learning As Practice: Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Lave and Wenger (1991:15) emphasise the situated nature of learning over any consideration of instruction:

> Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind.

They view agent, activity, and world, as mutually constitutive, hence learning is a process of participation and participation is learning. Learning takes place in a *community of practice* while pedagogy is not seen as some privileged form of learning (ibid.:93):

> The effectiveness of the circulation of information among peers suggests … that engagement in practice, rather than being its object, may well be a condition for the effectiveness of learning.

Lave and Wenger describe this engagement in social practice as *legitimate peripheral participation*, an engagement that entails learning as an integral constituent (for example, the act of participation *is* learning because it makes a difference to our capacity to participate). It is not a question of *whether* we participate, but whether we recognise exactly what it is that we are participating in.

Being *peripheral* is not a negative term. Whilst the periphery cannot be central, it is located *in* the social world and one's location will change as one learns (ibid.:36):

> Changing locations and perspectives are part of actors' learning trajectories, developing identities, and forms of membership.

Even where participation is not encouraged or allowed, it is through participation in some unintended form that learning takes place – so the content of learning may also be unintended.

Earlier in this chapter, I raised the need for schools to balance exposure to new ideas with participation in the child's context, a concern arising from the extent to which people do not remember their school learning. From the perspective of legitimate peripheral participation, this 'forgetfulness' is explained by the fact that the people we interviewed were no longer in school. What they *did* learn at school was 'how to do school'; that was their community of practice. Once they left that community they no longer needed that learning, hence it was forgotten. While we are in school, we are legitimately peripheral but we are not participating in society, so much of the learning is irrelevant beyond the confines of this *sequestration* (Lave and Wenger's term). There is support here for those who consider it inappropriate to 'teach' citizenship in schools. During our early years and adolescence, we either become good at 'doing school', or we may be disaffected from it; neither position is particularly well linked to the society that we later join. This is particularly true of schools that fail to offer opportunities for learning beyond the classroom (cf. Chapters 18, 19 and 20, this volume).

Lave and Wenger cite the role of apprenticeship as a classic example of legitimate peripheral participation. The apprentice begins with simple, repetitive tasks and gradually acquires the skills of the master. A key point to note is that the motivation for learning is that of gaining *identity*. In the case of apprenticeship, the control of the master is gradually diminished as the apprentice achieves a sense of identity as a master practitioner. In achieving this status however, apprentices create a problem for their masters because they develop ideas of their own and may wish to change the very practice that they have learned, as Lave and Wenger (1991:116) put it:

> Granting legitimate participation to newcomers with their own viewpoints introduces into any community of practice all the tensions of the continuity-displacement contradiction.

This may go some way to explain why weak forms of participation are frequently deployed on development projects, for in this way they avoid conflicts with the elites. Likewise, there are strong parallels between *legitimate peripheral participation* and the notion of *gradually diminishing control* that we used in Uganda. At first glance, they come from opposite perspectives – Lave and Wenger's term is clearly learner-orientated as it is the learner who is participating peripherally, while it is the educator who is diminishing control. But there are problems here; I wish to highlight three for the purposes of this chapter.

Three concerns with Lave and Wenger's approach

First, the extent to which we achieve mastery appears to depend, to some degree, on our overcoming the 'continuity-displacement contradiction'. Rather than view this as a contradiction, it may be more helpful to examine the complex processes by which policies and practices *do* change, with or without the blessing of their respective elites.

The process of 'structuration' suggested by sociologist Anthony Giddens (Cassell 1993), is helpful here. Giddens notes how patterns of social practice are 'structured' by rules, resources, and power. Structure is not external – agents bring structure into being and structure produces the possibility of agency, so, in an echo of 'learning as participation', we see that to be an agent is to participate in restructuring. This duality of structure 'consists in structure's two-sided existence – as both the medium and unintended outcome of social practices' (Giddens, in Cassell 1993:12).

Giddens cites the example of language. By using language and following its rules, we both communicate and (unwittingly) perpetuate the spoken word. As agents use the rules freely, the modification of the rules is an ever-present possibility. 'At each point of structural reproduction there is the potential for change' (Cassell 1993:12). This is the basis of Giddens' concept of *structuration* (Giddens, in Bryant and Jary 2001:12):

> To examine the structuration of a social system is to examine the modes whereby that system, through the application of generative rules and resources, is produced and reproduced in social interaction.

So while Lave and Wenger's legitimate peripheral participation provides us with a 'generative' process, Giddens' concept of structuration helps us see that 'continuity-displacement' is not a contradiction but a 'two-sided existence'.

My second concern is that there are instances where the practice in which we are engaged is not something that may ultimately 'be achieved' because there is no agreed or delimited body of practice. How do we know, for example, at which point we have achieved mastery in sustainable development, a field characterised by uncertainty and risk (Scott and Gough 2003)?

Even the localised examples of field walkers and washirika are not following an established practice in their respective settings. The question of mastery, therefore, does not arise. The programme should operate successfully for some years, perhaps then it can be defined. Similarly, when developing posters in Uganda, the subject matter of the poster was unknown at the start of each workshop, there was no master version or replicable discussion in which residents would participate with decreasing peripherality. The issue appears to be one of analysing learning, participation, and context when the context itself is not fully known. The advice of Lyotard (1984), to work without rules in order to 'discover the rules of what you have done', would best describe this situation, but a rigorous analysis is required to avoid unmanageable woolliness.

Finally, Lave and Wenger's strong claims for legitimate peripheral participation appear to deny that we actually *acquire* knowledge as individuals, yet our own experience informs us that each person's store of experience and knowledge is unique. What we learn in one context is not forgotten; we can and we do carry a great deal over with us to other situations and communities of practice. In this way, we may enter new communities as 'experts', at least in some aspects of that new system. Adherence to legitimate peripheral participation as dogma would certainly leave serious gaps in any analysis of learning in a complex social system. Thus, ultimately, I turn to a theoretical analysis of activity systems themselves.

8.10   Learning as Outcome of Activity: Cultural–Historical Activity Theory

Activity theory appears to address the above concerns through its analysis of human interactions within all the objects, manners, and meanings that characterise social systems. The unifying concept of the cultural-historical school is *activity* that comprises social action and individual conduct. Yrjö Engeström (1999), a leading exponent of CHAT, points out that the theory has its roots in Marxist thought. Marx recognises that change is not brought about from above or simply by self-change in individuals (Engeström 1999:9):

> The key is "revolutionary practice", which is not to be understood in narrowly political terms but as joint "practical-critical activity", potentially embedded in any mundane everyday practice.

So this is far more than watching a group of reflective practitioners at work. All our actions or social practices are imbued with cultural, social, and historical meanings and are the result of individual and social learning. To analyse this, CHAT takes as its unit of analysis (ibid.:9):

> [T]he concept of *object-oriented*, *collective*, and *culturally mediated human activity* or *activity system*. Minimum elements of this system include the object, subject, mediating artefacts (signs and tools), rules, community and division of labour.

The activity analyst looks down on an activity system from above but also engages with subjects within the system. Thus the analysis combines internal and external perspectives, systemic and partisan views, and (ibid.:10):

> The study of an activity system becomes a collective, multivoiced construction of its past, present, and future zones of proximal development.

Such an analysis would reveal the apparently idiosyncratic and chance encounters that tell the story of any system, including sustainable development projects, and may prove rigorous enough to overcome the conflict between exploratory development processes and rigid quality assurance.

To begin to apply this depth of analysis to something as mundane as project management, I will return to the example of the six senior project managers that I mentioned near the start of this chapter, each with conflicting versions of what we would have called 'common sense'. This should be unsurprising when we consider that we were all new to the project, came from three different countries, spoke five different mother tongues and had diverse professional backgrounds. It is also relevant that the term 'participation' (as a binding concept) had not yet entered our individual consciousness. Indeed, it could be claimed, that with no shared conceptual framework or body of experience, we lacked *common sense*.

Yet we were qualified professionals who had all been hired to work on the same project. We could all read English very well and would have no trouble understanding the project's aims, which we all supported. So why should common sense get in the way? A CHAT analysis would examine our internal perceptions, reveal the rules and regulations that bound us, and explore the contradictory histories behind the value systems under which we operated (or the rules that we all thought we shared). In order to reflect on what common sense is, I turn to Antonio Gramsci, whose work is analysed by the Italian psychologist and activity theorist, Francesco Paolo Colucci (1999).

Gramsci does not contrast common sense with the abstruseness of philosophers. Rather he recognises that all people are philosophers, capable of *spontaneous philosophy*. This is not to confuse common sense with folklore, the distinction being that common sense is not rigid but is continuously transformed, whereas folklore consists of belief systems, religions, superstitions, and opinions (and thus constitutes a part of our common sense).

In Gramsci's view, common sense originates from several sources, including language itself, but most importantly from philosophical–scientific thought (Colucci 1999:152):

> There is a continuity of passage, which implies a change of meaning, from philosophical and scientific to common language.

So, as common sense grows and becomes established, it draws its authority from philosophical–scientific thought and from other authoritative sources. When the project team formed in Uganda, we had no common pool of authoritative sources beyond the project document. Our individual sources of authority, our literature, and language, were all different. The project was an 'integrated conservation and development

project', but without common practice, integration was difficult. This caused a false start in the project, something that went beyond Bruce Tuckman's (1965) well-known model of team development: *forming, storming, norming, performing*. An analysis using CHAT would not only have helped the team track its development of rules and social mores, it would have informed an emerging project world view because we were aiming to achieve our objectives through changes in social practice.

This development of common sense by drawing on authoritative sources is a process that Gramsci terms *historicity* because authorities are only adhered to by the masses (and thus infuse common sense) if their ideas 'correspond to the needs of a complex and organic historical period' (Colucci 1999:152). Common sense is therefore 'critical' in nature while conformism is only meaningful 'if we bear in mind its dialectical relation with this critical aspect' (ibid.). The idea that collective action requires individual critical thinkers who can make sense of their role within it is an empowering concept.

In this way, we can integrate collective activity and individual action, something that Alexei N. Leont'ev achieved when he first summarised activity theory. Engeström (1999) cites Leont'ev's famous example of the beater in a primitive hunt: the motive for his actions might be skin or meat but simply fulfilling his task of frightening the game cannot meet these needs. Instead he is involved in an activity with others that might eventually lead to his needs being met, thus (Engeström 1999:3):

> The beater's *activity* is the hunt, and the frightening of the game is his *action*.[3]

In this way, Leont'ev builds on Marxist analysis; he recognises that there is a division of labour as exemplified by the hunt, but sees this as a fundamental historical process that requires critically engaged individuals. Thus with Gramsci, *praxis* is identified as the interaction between theory and practical action, the process through which common sense changes and a more critical common sense can develop. The elites therefore need the masses (and their practical experience) as much as the masses need elites, and given that we are *all* philosophers, different groups at different times will develop their own form of common sense that works for them (even integrated conservation and development projects).

The role of all responsible adults (and Gramsci sees teachers as needing to be particularly responsible) is to ensure that people, especially those in marginalised groups, are able to articulate their own stories or world views while interacting with the philosophical and scientific views of the elites. Bearing in mind the significance of situated learning, informal educators such as community development workers also have a particular responsibility to bear.

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[3] This distinction between *action* and *activity* is of a different order to the distinction made between these two terms in the action competence approach. Action competence defines an *activity* as something which is designed solely as a counterweight to academic tuition *or* something that a student is pushed to do. An *action*, on the other hand, has the dual characteristic of having a problem solving or change perspective *and* involving the student in deciding what to do (Jensen and Schnack 1997). In activity theory, an *action* is simply a component of the broader *activity*.

8.11 Conclusion, Two Further Questions and a Health Warning

It is often the case that the closer we work to everyday life, the more impossibly complex our systems appear. Reducing these processes to 'scientific' cognitive rules does not explain many of the (often obscure) motivations that are being played out in any human activity system. Indeed, discoveries of *neuromodulation*, revealing a virtually infinite range of neural responses to stimuli (Greenfield 1997), supports the argument that brains are not at all like computers. Participatory activities therefore, with their opportunities for social engagement, challenge, and reinforcement, would better help us achieve common, meaningful interpretations of the world than disseminating instructions, however clearly.

CHAT is potentially of great value to sustainable development projects, not only as a means of analysing complex systems but because its approach characterises learning as an *outcome* of activity within a system. This both informs and justifies the argument that sustainable development is a learning process (Foster 2002; Scott and Gough 2003). Indeed, situated learning perceives *any* sort of social development as a learning process.

The complex nature of situated learning and participation also undermines dominant western notions of linear development. The specific outcomes of participation will depend more on the potential of the participants, their cultural-historical background and a wide range of other factors (as identified by Engeström), than on a specific project intervention. The learning that takes place cannot be a predetermined development that is 'done to' people, but will be an unfolding or an emergence that requires close analysis if it is to be understood. Such a perspective resonates so well with systemic views of education for sustainable development (Sterling 2001) that it seems inevitable that these hitherto separate traditions will become more closely aligned.

This leads to a question that merits further investigation. Situated learning suggests that to invite people to 'participate in their own development' is nonsense because they are *always already* participants. The challenge for external change agents is to participate in the lives (or activity systems) of the people they would assist. So what are the implications for the staff, volunteers, and organisations who facilitate learning? To what extent can both parties recognise where participation on both sides is realistic, sensible, and helpful? Is it enough for the change agent to simply participate in other people's lives and see what happens? (It might be a powerful stimulus). Would anyone fund this as a mode of development rather than a mode of research?

At the institutional level, Lyotard's suggestion of 'working without rules' is unlikely to impress those charged with managing public funds, yet CHAT is just such an exploratory process. To what extent will policy makers accept investigation of outcomes over traditional, target-driven project management? This question applies to national policy and at project level (virtually all major donors insist on projects having predetermined logical frameworks).

There is some hope here. The UK Government commissioned a major study of the operation of the new Children's Fund (Edwards *et al*. 2006). The Children's Fund aims to support new cross-sector partnerships (e.g. across social services, education, health, police), in order to deliver services to children. It is appropriate therefore that the study is based on CHAT, an inherently interdisciplinary approach.

Having said this, we should avoid getting carried away. Activity theory is only one possible approach. Whilst for the academic there is a danger of becoming ghettoised in an exclusive club of activity theorists, for the practitioner, there is the danger that this becomes another trend to be applied mechanistically to all we do. As Sfard (1998:10) warns us:

> When a theory is translated into instructional prescription, exclusivity becomes the worst enemy of success.

CHAT may answer the need for rigorous evaluation of an open-ended development process, but it had better not be overplayed lest donors and institutions are encouraged to apply this as an even more intrusive tool of surveillance. Rather than failing to record unforeseen outcomes, *this* quality assurance tool leaves nothing to chance. Yet some of our most creative moments occur in the hidden cracks between regulated activities often *because* we are safely out of sight from analysts. Can we trust our authorities to balance serendipity with quality assurance? Would chance not be a fine thing?

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