



# Expansive social learning: the work and role of the formative interventionist researcher

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**RHODES UNIVERSITY**  
*Where leaders learn*



# In Transformations to Sustainability

- Transformative
- Transdisciplinary
- Transgressive
- Together

*social learning*



Not enough is known about the ‘how’ of transformative social learning in NRM and sustainability oriented fields ...

- My focus: understanding the processes involved in the emergence of **endogenous social learning processes**
- I will not speak from a ‘Development Agency’ or an evaluative point of view, but rather from the point of view of the Learning Sciences and especially the **Environmental Learning Sciences in the Global South**, where a strong interest in social learning has emerged given the nature of ‘wicked problems’ that people are dealing with.



# Some of the contexts of formative social learning research



Organic farming with no markets

Land degradation with > pressure on the land



Land with inadequate water





# Some of the contexts of formative social learning research



Organic farming with no markets



Land with inadequate water

All of these are multi-levelled, complex issues that require 'intervention' to resolve them

What role for T-social learning?





# Some of the issues we have deliberated in our research

- Giving in-depth attention to **the 'how'** of social learning helps one to avoid 'ontological collapse' in social learning research
- Ontological collapse occurs when processes become reduced to outcomes or 'things'

(Lotz-Sisitka, Belay & Mukute, 2012).





Tried to focus in depth on the meanings of 'social' and 'learning' in the concept of social learning

- This has taken us in the direction of understanding **socio-cultural nature of learning**, in the context of **socio-material realities and relations** (these can become conflated)
- Especially interested in social learning processes and the **emergence of collective agency**



- We draw a lot on Vygotsky's insight: "Development processes do not precede learning; nor do they co-incide with learning processes; **rather the developmental process lags behind the learning process**; this sequence resulting in zones of proximal development".
- Zones of proximal development can be semiotic, cultural and/or activity based – **the latter is most interesting for the sustainability sciences** with their interest in transformations to sustainability ... as sustainability will ultimately be reflected in transformed human activity







- This brings **MEDIATION** to the fore
  - Via symbolic systems (e.g. new concepts, language etc)
  - Via artefacts (concepts; tools)
  - Via interactions with the materiality of life (experiences)

And **MEDIATORS** of learning who help with

- Identifying contradictions, tensions, absences and ills (matters of concern)
- Creating useful double stimulation tools
- Supporting learning through intermediary action
- Supporting reflexivity and agency (individual, collective and relational)



## • This brings

- Via symbol
- Via art
- Via in

## And MED

- Identify
- Creating
- Supporting le
- Supporting reflexiv

MEDIATION OF AND FOR  
Creation of new  
knowledge and new  
practices for a newly  
emerging activity i.e.  
collectively 'learning  
'what is not yet there'

(Engestrom 2016

concern)

ve and relational)



# The socio-cultural tradition in the learning sciences posits that ...

- The study of human functioning and change is *inseperable from the settings in which it is enacted*. This requires refined ethnographic and qualitative methods to develop and 'track' the emergence of social learning and change *as it emerges*.
- And it requires development of new analytic units to support empirical enquiry – ones that open up opportunities for analysing **the interplay between historical and developmental / emergent processes** in the micro-, socio and ontogenic construction of knowledge, agency and activity i.e. PROCESS-based research ...



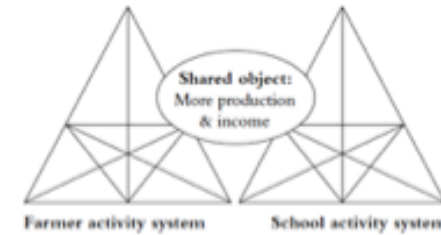
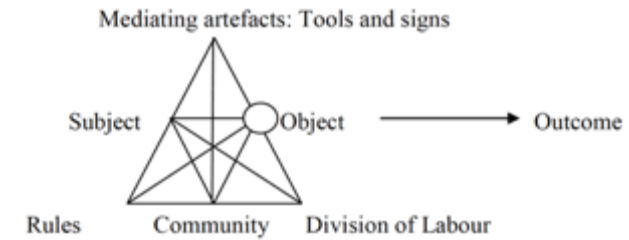
# The socio-cultural tradition in the learning sciences posits that ...

- The study of human function is inseparable from *the settings in which* it occurs, including ethnographic and historical analysis of the emergence of social practices
- And it requires empirical enquiry and analysis of **the interactional / emergent processes** of knowledge construction of knowledge-based research ...

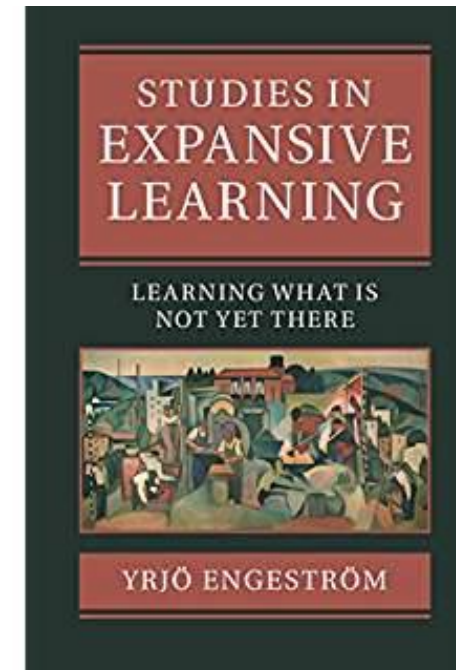
This is where the challenges lie for SL research interventions that are oriented towards cultural, social and structural changes that reflect sustainability



This has implications for **the role of the expansive learning researcher** - he / she is a **'formative interventionist'** who is an integral part of the creation of new knowledge and new practices for a newly emerging activity  
(Engeström & Sannino, 2010)



1987



2016

- Activity theory suggests that learning is best analyzed and promoted as embedded in collective activity systems and their networks
- This means that learning and instruction are most effective and consequential when they are intertwined with community-level efforts of transformation

**this requires local 'staying power' and continuity in the SL process and wider intervention**



# What is expected of the social learning researcher / practitioner?

## Understand and uncover cultural historical dynamics of the activity:

- Political historical marginalisation and exclusion
- Land ownership and use
- Cultural practices of RWH&C (Gelesha)
- Economic situation
- Educational experience
- Social relations
- Health situation
- Youth opportunities

Identifying and engaging interacting activity systems at different levels around a 'shared activity or object of activity'

## Identifying contradictions

Former Bantustan area, Land redistribution without water access



## Forming learning networks



Mediating new knowledge



**6. Reflecting on and assessing the process**  
What did we achieve and how?

**5. Implementing**  
How can the model be put into practice; how should it be revised?



**4. Examining the model**  
How would this model work in real situations?

**7. Consolidating**  
How can we make the new model last; what does this mean for our partners?



**1. Questioning**  
What is going wrong; What is threatening us?



**2. Analysis**  
What is behind the problems; what generates them?

**3. Modeling**  
How do we want to function after five years?

**Developing 'double stimulation tools' and supporting sequences of 'learning actions' over time ...**

**Co-learning 'what is not yet there':** the ability to work in open system 'interventionist' frame (i.e. formative intervention' mode)



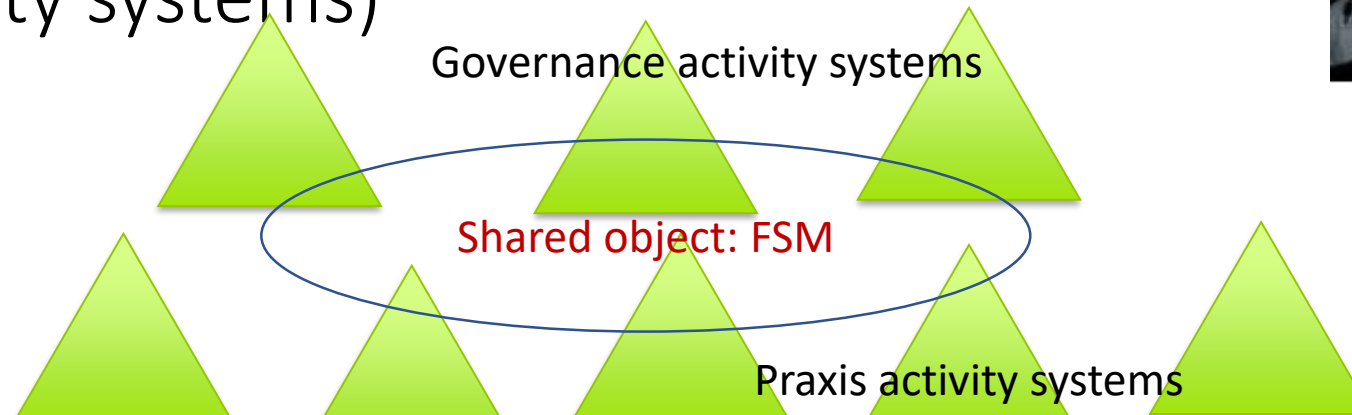


# Emergence of new activity: RWH&C



Mediation as 'Intermediary Action' in the emergence of new activity

Interventions are multi-layered and require expansive social learning across the value chain and at multiple levels (interacting activity systems)



The FSM Chain



**Mediating of 'joined up' co-learning across the value chain and at multiple levels of socio-technical / social-ecological innovation and change**





# Key point: A vitally important part of the ‘how’ of social learning is **supporting the mediation process:**

- Endogenous researchers who share an interest in the potential of new activity
- Have the skills to surface contradictions, absences, ills, possibilities **with people involved in the activity** and create / co-create new double stimulation tools / cultural artefacts. *This can be done in ‘living labs’ / T-learning labs / Change Labs / Challenge Labs etc. or via course activated learning in learning networks.*
- Can generate collective reflexivity around the double stimulation tools / cultural artefacts and proposals for activity transformation (collective)
- Can support ‘intermediary actions’ towards collective creation of new activity & transformative agency

“agent’s acting with mediational means: the most basic definition of agency”

“the ‘emergence of new cultural tools transforms power and authority”  
(Daniels, 2008)



# This has implications for the development of of intervention oriented social learning practice

- Interventions are difficult to ‘consolidate’ without giving attention to social learning and the emergence of new activity
- Social learning facilitators (who are also formative interventionist researchers) engaged in such processes need skills for supporting the mediation process
- Endogenous researchers working in endogenous settings allows for continuity of expansive social learning in interventions; i.e. *we could perhaps do more to focus here on SL capacity building for longer term impact in interventions ...*



Thank you!