Changing practice: A course to support water activists in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper explores developing an action learning short course to support water activists by addressing the gap between formal knowledge and the ability of people to apply this knowledge in practice and in relationship with local lived experiences.

The short course is part of a larger citizen-monitoring research project, known as the NWRS2-watch, that aims to assess civil society involvement in water policy, to strengthen community based organisations and networks in the water sector and to pilot and test how action learning can capacitate and empower civil society to participate more fully and meaningfully in local water governance (Pereira, 2013).

A key concern of the course has been how to counteract current participatory approaches which instead of engaging with civil society tend to lead to exclusion (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Lotz-Sisitka, and Burt, 2006; Lotz-Sisitka, and O'Donoghue, 2008; Price, 2004; Price, L. 2005). This happens because the way in which knowledge is produced excludes civil society by assuming that members of civil society are only consumers and not creators of knowledge (Visvanathan, 2005), by presenting knowledge in a way that is inaccessible, and by ignoring the lived experience of injustice that is the everyday reality of many South Africans regardless of South Africa's progressive policies and laws. The course aims at strengthening civil society's ability to articulate and strengthen local action projects by navigating different knowledge systems (Cornell, Berkhout, Tuinstra, Tàbara, Jäger, Chabay and van Kerkhoff, 2013) and to be able to articulate local issues within a broader landscape of national policy and governance structures.

Keywords: Cognitive justice, social learning design, emancipatory pedagogy, social movements, environmental and social injustice, agency

Introduction

In 2014, the South African Water Caucus (SAWC), a network of NGOs and CBOs active in the water sector, embarked on a social learning and action research journey, supported by the South African Water Research Commission (WRC) to deepen its monitoring of South Africa's second National Water Resources Strategy (NWRS2) through a focus on four issues in four case study areas.

This NWRS2-watch project was an in situ experiment to see what role civil society plays – and with the support of a social learning approach, can play more effectively – in building participatory democracy in the water sector. The project team was comprised of water activists from communities and non-governmental organisations affiliated to the SAWC and academics with shared values. In exploring the role of civil society, the project focussed

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on SAWC as a civil society network in the water sector that aims not only to improve the implementation of public interest aspects of water policy, such as equitable access to water and protection of rivers, but also to transform society to one that is fair and just. The policy focus was South Africa's second National Water Resources Strategy due to its overarching role in the water sector and SAWC's history of engagement with it. A social learning approach was used to test how, and to what degree, knowledge and agency could be strengthened in the water sector through working directly with a social movement such as the SAWC. Using case studies, the project team piloted an approach to civil society water policy monitoring and engagement at local, catchment and national levels. The case studies, which were grounded in local realities, contributed to a deeper understanding of key ecological, participatory, social justice and spiritual aspects of water governance.

This paper reflects on the learning of the research team and participants a year after embarking on the journey. At this point, the participants had learnt how to explore their context and practices relating to local water governance, as well as how to build and use a knowledge network. They had also engaged with governance structures at local, catchment and national levels. At the point of writing this paper, participants and the research team are in the process of developing case studies based on local experiences, and contextualised within a broader socio-economic discourse, including an understanding of power and ecology. The action research is embedded in ongoing activism which has a long history of organisation relating to environmental justice.

Supporting civil society action in the water sector in South Africa

In the 1990s, in the seemingly stable, urbanised and mechanised communities of the West, capitalism started taking its toll. The youth responded with grunge and a form of rock music that captured the listlessness, lack of purpose, pressure and degenerative values of late modernity (Beck, 1992).

> But I'm a creep, I'm a weirdo,
> What the hell am I doing here?
> I don't belong here.
> I don't care if it hurts
> I want to have control
> I want a perfect body
> I want a perfect soul
> I want you to notice
> When I'm not around.
> (Clarke, M., 1992)

Besides the mod coms and supportive structures within society, the youth could not see a future for themselves. The warning signs of environmental devastation were increasingly visible. Yet for others, there were refreshing signs. The collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War allayed people's fear of a nuclear holocaust. On the flip side, it meant that capitalism had no 'check' at an international level and could expand unchallenged. The World Trade Organisation was established in the mid-90s to systematically remove trade

barriers that countries had established to nurture and protect local industry. At the same time, the slow steady work on the global nature and interconnectedness of environmental and developmental challenges bore fruit in the form of the first World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Despite many compromises, Rio delivered three key multilateral environmental agreements on climate change, biodiversity and desertification as well as Agenda 21 – an agenda on development, governance and environmental protection for the 21st Century.

In South Africa, the mood was jubilant. The '90s' could be referred to as the 'decade of rights'. There was some uncertainty and fear but there was also a rising tide of optimism and change. Apartheid fell and radical and transformative change gripped society. The first tasks of this transformative agenda were to change the laws and policies that had governed the land for the previous 50 years, and to reintegrate into the international arena. Almost all laws were discarded and re-written. This also applied to water law. The best and sharpest minds were pulled together to participate in shaping a new way of thinking about water as a resource. What emerged was a law that has been hailed as the most progressive water law in the world.

In the past, land owners had 'riparian rights,' meaning that if they owned land next to the river they automatically had access to this water. In the new law, water was seen as public good in the custodianship of the state. This was partly informed by the need to confront Apartheid's legacy and ensure that water didn't remain solely in the hands of white farmers. In keeping with best international practice, South Africa also adopted an approach known as integrated water resource management. This included mechanisms to ensure that the public were consulted AND could participate in the management of their own water resources. Under Apartheid, finances were made available to provide water services primarily to white people, so, with liberation, a second water act, focused on water services, was promulgated. However, this act was also informed by emerging global trends for economic efficiency and cost recovery. Water service provision in South Africa continues to tread a fine line between the right to water and recovering the costs of its provision, which, in a country of such deep inequity, inevitably leads to exclusion through lack of affordability.

Decentralisation is one of the key mechanisms for enhancing the participation of multiple stakeholders and ensuring that resources are locally managed in the best interest of people living in catchments and for the catchments. The national Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) (the then Department of Water Affairs and Forestry) focused on setting up a complex institutional arrangement to enable decentralised management and a devolution of power to local structures. The task of providing water services fell to local authorities and the task of water resources management was gradually to be transferred to institutions that were still to be set up. This establishment of new institutions and structures required its own process of participation and consultation. The task of participating bore its own cost on the poorer populations as it was simply assumed people would be able to travel many kilometres and give up precious time that was spent on collecting water, growing food and going to work. Meetings were often held during work hours which

excluded all working class people from attending. They were often held in cities which excluded the attendance of rural populations. These unconsidered aspects of participation occurred along with many other challenges that are inevitable in a country where the levels of inequity are still large and apparent (Edigheji, 2004; Lotz-Sisitka, and Burt, 2006; Allouche, Middleton and Gyawali, 2015).

The Bill of Rights forms the ethical core of South Africa's Constitution, and it is widely acknowledged that these rights cannot be met without strong participation by civil society. Rights of access to information, administrative justice and participation in natural resources management are elaborated and enshrined in various ensuing Acts. The government is mandated to support the participation of civil society and civil society needs to protect this right and enhance it. A democratic society will not work without the dynamic relationship between a strong civil society and a government that recognises the role that civil society can and should play. The research project discussed in this paper explores how an action learning approach with a strong focus on learning and cognitive justice can support civil society action within the water sector.

This research project is a partnership between the non-governmental organisation (NGO), Environmental Monitoring Group, academics and the SAWC. SAWC is a network of NGO's, community based organisations and individual activists in the South African water sector which has been active since 2001. (Munnik, Wilson and Pereira, 2015, p. vii)

The Caucus has its roots in environmental justice and was also part of the new wave of social movements that emerged after the strong social movements 'moved from opposition to apartheid to being in government.' (Ballard *et al.* quoted in Munnik, Barnes, Burt, Ashe, and MotLoung, 2015). At the time, there was a lot of international funding available for government to fund extensive consultation with civil society groups. In those days the Caucus used to meet with the national Minister of Water annually and members remember regular workshops and meetings that they attended with government officials to discuss civil society concerns. The Caucus was also active in contributing to the first national water resource strategy where participation was encouraged and funded (although not run in a particularly empowering way). In contrast, no government funding was made available for participation in the development of the second national water resource strategy, and there was no initiative by government to consult with civil society. The reasons for this were never presented. However it aligns with a trend that SAWC has observed, that budgets for engaging with civil society on water issues are shrinking or becoming non-existent (Munnik, Wilson *et al.*, 2015).

Civil society is again expressing dissatisfaction with the way in which government views (or ignores) their democratic partnership. Beyond the Caucus this dissatisfaction can be witnessed in the growing service delivery protests that are taking place across South Africa and the recent student protests which were so well organised and determined that the South African government agreed to a 'no increase' in university fees for 2016.

This change in the relationship between government and civil society is captured beautifully in a song by a South African musician. This melancholic song is a tribute to the

great love and power of Nelson Mandela and a sad lament that as South Africans we have failed him. In the silences of the song and the last lines there are still wisps of hope which almost prophesise a new wave of mobilisation on behalf of democratic society which we hope this course and this research contributes towards.

> Do you remember when all of us called out your name?
> Our hearts were on fire and nothing could stand in our way
> I climbed on the rooftop waiting for you to appear
> To the end of my days I will always remember that day.
>
> But this is so far from where we wanted to be
> The river keeps flowing but it never reaches the sea.
>
> Here in the twilight your body grows tired and frail
> The world has its way now
> What did we think we could change.
> But in the silent depth of our memories
> You remain strong
> Speaking words that sound increasingly strange
> (Hopwood, T, 2008)

A research project to strengthen civil society through monitoring the National Water Resource Strategy

Civil society's role in the water sector is to deepen participatory democracy and monitor public interest aspects of water policy, whereas government's role is to regulate and give effect to policy through institutions and budgets. This can make the dialogue between these groups difficult as they 'see' the issues in different ways and bring different understanding to what needs to be done. For example, Cape Town is internationally recognised for its efforts in water conservation, whereas poor household living in Cape Town experience social water scarcity.

Water governance structures have been put in place to provide a space where these two groups and others can meet to negotiate policy and its implementation. However, these are characterised by valuing certain forms of knowledge (e.g. scientific and economic) over others (e.g. lived experiences and human-river relations). This means that spaces for public participation are continuously contested as to their value and often appropriated by large water users. The necessary finance and expertise to facilitate these spaces is often absent, as was evident in the NWRS2 consultation process.

The South African Water Caucus has continued to be active regardless of the changing relationship between government and civil society. In 2012, the Caucus organised, discussed and made a significant input into the NWRS2. It was not an easy process to participate in as documents were hard to access, read and understand, and working with DWS was described as 'not easy' (Munnik, Barnes *et al.*, 2015). Documents were not available except in English, and there was no initiative to support involvement.

The NWRS is an important policy as it aims to 'provide strategic direction for water resources in South Africa'. The first NWRS was not widely known or used, which is worrying considering the challenges facing South Africa in terms of water. It is for this reason that this research project was initiated with the aims to build capacity within civil society to monitor the NWRS2, build the relationships to do this and facilitate the meaningful participation of civil society. Four of the ten issues raised by the SAWC in their submission to DWS for the NWRS2 were chosen for the focus of this research, being:

1. Water conservation and demand management in the context of climate change (Western Cape Water Caucus).

2. Plantations, ecosystems and water (Mpumalanga Water Caucus)

3. Access to productive water for poor communities and small farmers (Eastern and Western Cape Water Caucuses)

4. Civil society monitoring of water quality (Gauteng Water Caucus)

Although these issues cut across many provinces, for the purpose of the project, each one is linked to a different provincial branch of the SAWC and is also held within an organisation in each region.

To explore how to build the capacity and confidence of civil society to develop these cases for monitoring the NWRS2, the project host Environmental Monitoring Group (an NGO member of SAWC) partnered with the Environmental Learning Research Centre from Rhodes University to run a course that was designed to address the challenges of meaningful civil society participation. Participants were chosen from each region to develop 'Change Projects' (see below) around the four issues mentioned above. These Change Projects are anchored in organisations in the region which support the participants with their work.

How can this approach to action learning further the aims of cognitive justice for environmental justice and activism?

Why a focus on cognitive justice?

Cognitive justice is a term phrased by Visvanathan (2005) in relation to his analysis of the tyranny of development and science in India. He calls our attention to the cognitive injustice of development programmes and how they do not acknowledge the powerful and inventive knowledge creation of all people within their own contexts. It is a reaction to the way in which science-based interventions and development initiatives do not acknowledge that knowledge and knowing is a social practice that is culturally and contextually rooted.

Often local or indigenous knowledge is validated by comparing it to scientific knowledge. If the two knowledges concur, this gives validity to the claims made by local people. But, it is also politically astute to get scientific knowledge validated by a broad range of stakeholders because then scientists can make the claim that their knowledge has been accepted by multi-stakeholder groups in the area thus increasing its status and validity. There is a

danger in reducing knowledge to empirical information rather than knowing being understood as something that exists within contexts and environments (Burt, 2015).

There is also a danger of a particular participatory focus of action learning actually leading to marginalising how people read and make sense of the world (Freire, 2000). Just because a group of people are in the room does not mean that this is a situation where knowledge is co-constructed in a just manner. What often is ignored is that the very way in which knowing is seen to take place in the world and the values associated with this position is part and parcel of the process of being an inventor rather than a consumer of knowledge. As Lotz-Sisitka and O'Donoghue argue, "...participation processes are structured for the emancipation and empowerment of the participants, but the knowledge, ideology, morals, ethics and standards are based on the ideals of others. Contextualised historical knowledge, experiences, opinions, and existing learning materials, are often excluded." (Silva, Lindley and Dominguez, 2015, p. 14)

For us then, cognitive justice is understanding that knowing and knowledges are linked to people and landscapes and just like land and water, these knowings cannot just be unconsciously consumed, used, removed, or appropriated into the language and meaning of other knowledge systems without causing damage. Furthermore, it is only by recognising, creating and using knowledge *in context* that beneficial change is possible.

The course: Changing practice as a catalyst for change and action

Our approach is to see learning as a process that supports people to become authentic thinkers (Freire, 2000) and change agents. We draw on the work of Freire (2000), Engeström (2000; 2007) in relation to his ideas around expansive learning and emphasis on the importance of history, culture and agency, and social learning (Wals, 2007), which emphasises that learning needs to lead to transformation in the world and post-colonial positions on the colonisation of epistemologies (Bailey, 2013; de Sousa Santos, 2009)

In environmental work, one of the challenges is to bridge the gap between knowledge and action. This course responds to this challenge. It does so by taking as the starting point each participant's current level of knowledge, their working context (what they do) and their aspirations for improving an aspect of natural resource management or redressing environmental injustice. In other words, it draws on relevant knowledge, skills, needs and aspirations.

Relevance is the starting point. The aim is to ensure that learning is actually applied in practice. This is done through a combination of strategies, all of which hinge on a practical project, called the 'Change Project', which participants initiate in consultation with their work colleagues in the anchor organisation. The anchor organisation is the organisation that is a member of the SAWC and responsible for holding the process within a particular province. Participants on the course are either employed by the anchor organisation or are associated with it.

The primary objective of the course is to develop the competency of practitioners to support the improvement of local natural resource management practices, water governance and environmental justice. As such, the course helps participants to work with knowledge in a way that is relevant to the context that they work in. It helps participants understand the complexities of knowledge use in practice. It aims to improve the educational practice (both mediation skills and social learning) of practitioners in the environmental sector who work directly with groups of people involved in natural resource management practices, water governance or in activities that affect the environment. The course requires all participants to interact with and contribute to the development of their community and work contexts through their chosen Change Project.

Another way of describing such an approach is to say that the course uses a reflexive 'work together' / 'work away' structure which allows for participants to apply what they have learnt in between course sessions. Through this process, participants learn the skills of how to mediate knowledge in response to questions that arise out of the work that they are doing. This approach leads to changes in people's thinking (cognitive change) and in their social action.

Participants' Change Projects also contribute to a broader research project. The on-the-ground experience of learning to develop a Change Project includes doing a contextual analysis, building a knowledge network, building a case study and planning and implementing an action plan which provides evidence of what enhances and constrains civil society participation in the NWRS2. Therefore the course is not only about building Change Projects in local areas but also about reflecting on what it means to build a social movement that is responsive and active in the water sector. As part of the course, participants are asked to reflect and analyse their own experiences of working as civil society activists. The results from this action research then feed products from the project such as the draft citizen monitoring guidelines (Wilson and Munnik, 2015). An example of this kind of course-based research is the analysis of participants' experience of engaging with local civil servants and politicians. All of the participants found this aspect of building a knowledge network difficult. This was mirrored back to researchers and the course facilitator when participants presented their second assignment: building a knowledge network. This led to the course participants and facilitators designing a network mapping exercise to investigate why it is difficult to engage with civil servants and politicians. This exercise will be done in all four case study areas by the participants as part of their mentorship sessions in the 'work away' part of the course. The results of this exercise will feed into the citizen monitoring guidelines and hopefully will be mirrored back to civil servants and politicians.

The 'work away' sessions also consist of mentoring meetings which are led by one of the participants from each case study area and attended, when possible, by one of the researchers or the course coordinator and facilitator. The course model and how it fits into the overall research project is outlined in Figure 7.1 below.

Fig. 7.1: Changing practice course model
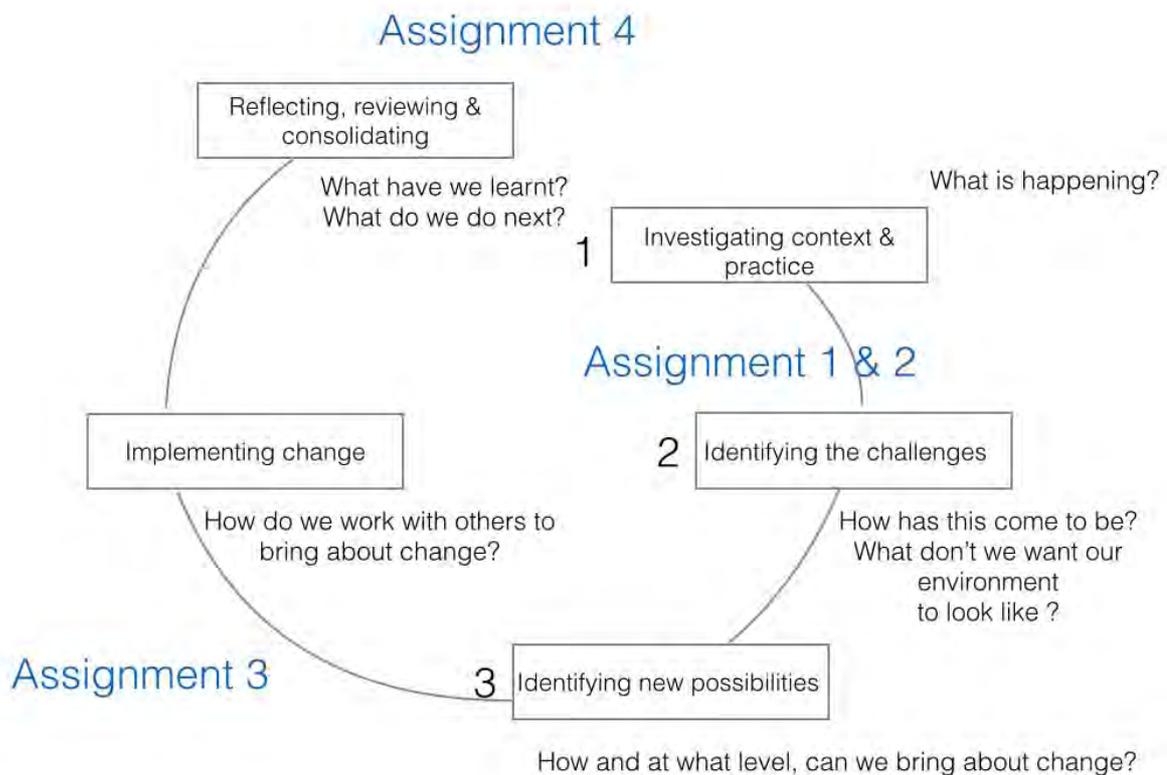
The course is guided by four key questions which also guide, but are not tied to, each of the four modules:

- What is happening? (Module one)

- How has this come to be? (Module two)

- How can we imagine new possibilities? (Module three)

- What have we learnt and what do we do next? (Module four)

Exploring context and practice and building a knowledge network

The first and second questions that guide this course ('What is happening?' and 'How has this come to be?') encourage a rigorous reading of the world with others. Czank (2012) argues that a rigorous reading of the world is necessary to understand how things have come to be through the history of individuals and structures and how these histories have produced the 'material and symbolic layers of human life." This 'reading of the world' (in this case, the local practice) is encouraged through photo-narratives, observing and questioning through narratives of practice in the context of the NWRS2.

Patricia's exploration of context through photographs

Patricia, who is working on the issue of 'plantations, ecosystems and water', developed a story of context by taking photographs and then describing the photographs. This is an example of one of her photographs.

Fig. 7.2: Patricia observes prophets discussing river water

> This picture shows prophets discussing about lack of water in the rivers and they don't know how they can solve these problems of water. The issue it represents is a shortage of water to the rivers, and the prophets are no longer baptizing people very well. People need to know, especially government and farmers, that the Gum trees are draining more water. It represent challenges that they face - farmers are more farming Gum trees while the traditional healers and the prophets are suffering because of the drainage of water by the Gum trees.

What is important to emphasis is that engaging with these questions does not only encourage participants to consider their local context as it exists right now but to ask questions about how what has happened in the past has led to this situation and to consider the different scales of influence that make the problem what it is today. This includes considering their local issues in the context of the NWRS2. This is done by encouraging participants to see their local context as situated within broader social life where influences at all scales, from the local to the global, impact on their issues. Another way of saying this is that it helps us understand social phenomena by viewing it as laminated (Bhaskar, 2010).

Fig 7.3: Participants broadening their understanding
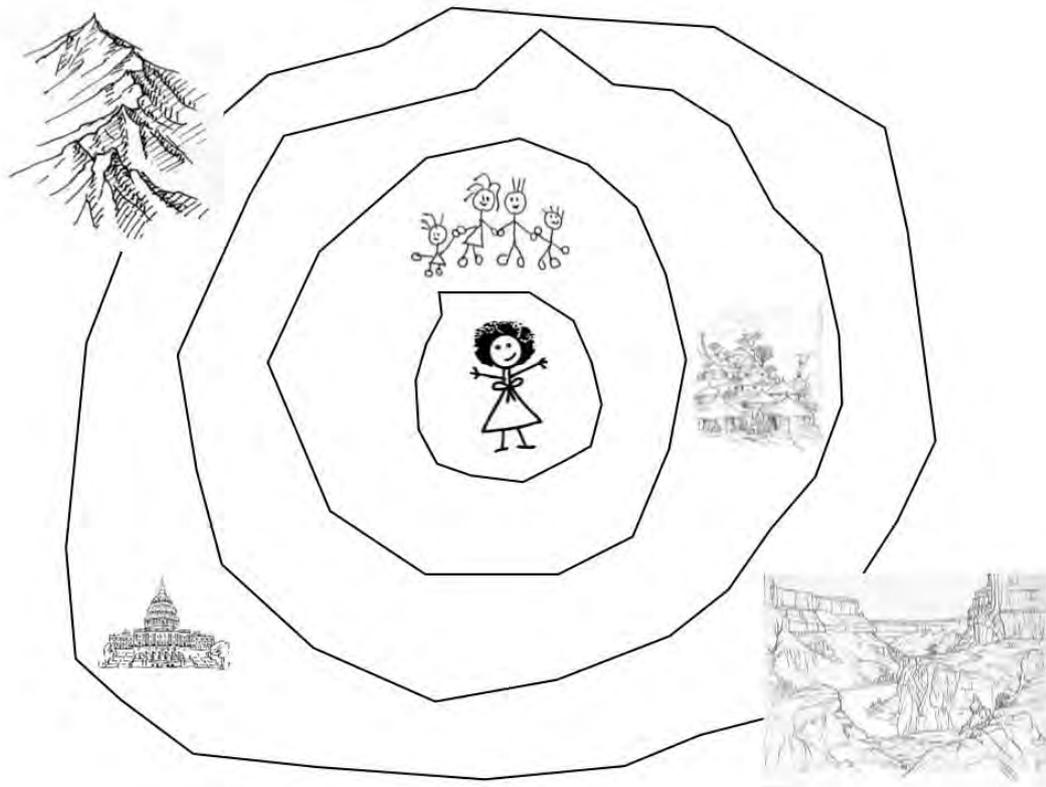
Participants start with their current understanding of their context then broaden their understanding through engaging with different knowledge at different scales and considering how their issue is part of a much broader context.

The focus of this aspect of the course also encourages participants to expand their understanding of issues beyond how they manifest in individuals' lives to consider the contradictions and issues in the practice which they are trying to change. For example, the practice of participating in a catchment forum or the practice of traditional healers and their relationship with polluted water. Practices represent our ability to do things, think about and say things about what we do and why, and they are the 'cornerstone' around which we relate to others and our environments (Kemmis, 2009). By focusing on practices, participants broaden their attention to considering how to change what we do rather than just critiquing an issue or representing a problem. It also gives us the tools to reflect on our own practice, for example, the kind of actions we take as activists and whether these lead to the kind of change we want to see in the world.

Fig. 7.4: James learns about 'narratives of practice' through Steven's salon

Manelisi is working on the issue 'water conservation and demand management in the context of climate change'.

> **Steven** is a Nigerian nationalist and he has been in Du Noon since 2011. He decided to open his salon in front of the house that he is renting and he needed water to run his business in order for him to put bread on the table for his family; and many of the household have water management devices (WMD) and due to the fact that these devices are not functioning effectively, this affects the community because they cannot get a reliable water supply.
>
> **Doings:** To run his business he had to connect the pipe from the landlord`s house and he had to connect a wire for power supply for heating water. He had to hire a Welder to cover the drain with a piece of flat iron so that it does not get blocked by the dirty things that are thrown negligently by the people. This does not end here as he had to build a corrugated shack and buy burglars in order to secure his business.
>
> **Sayings:** Steven says connecting water and electricity is not an easy thing to do as there is high cost involved. He says he is very happy about his business as it is not easy for foreign nationals to get employment. Steven is worried about the installation of water management device as it will affect his business. Steven also has a lot say about the municipality. He says the municipality should fix leaks and educate people about the water wastage and pollution.
>
> **Relatings:** In order to access water Steven has to rely on his landlord and to persuade members of the community not to throw dirty things in the drain. He also needed to speak to community leaders to speak with the local councillor so that there must be a space for emerging small businesses in the township.

The key skills learnt are how to stand back and reflect on how we are doing and how things could be done better. This is done by encouraging participants to understand the context they are working in and what practices already exist in these contexts that either inhibit or enhance change towards social and environmental justice.

Thabo observing the context as if for the first time

Thabo is working on the issue 'water conservation and demand management in the context of climate change'.

It was 2014 in October when I visited the area and the weather was not hot nor cold it was just pleasant that particular day. I finally decided to drive to Du Noon and not ask to be driven this time around. I remember being happy and nervous at the same time as I was not sure what to expect on the roads also I was not confident about the direction. Just imagine I've been going to Du Noon for years now. I remember coming from the N7 taking the off ramp to (Platterkloof) and being greeted by this huge tank of the refinery that is owned by chevron now formally owned by Caltex. Seeing this refinery just took me back to a conversation I had with Tex Dludla from Du Noon about how the smoke and dust affects them during the night in Du Noon, and I could feel the mood changing in me immediately. I continued driving until I arrived in Du Noon were I was welcomed by taxi mini buses just stopping at anytime and anywhere that's when that's what disturbed my chevron moment. First thing you will notice is the amount of people in the streets, the piles and piles of garbage on the side walk, water creating a soapy and greasy carpet on the road. Luckily I was driving (and that feeling so un-activist) but I truly did feel glad. Other observations would be the unbelievable architecture of the houses NO.! They are not beautiful they are incredible small. You would also see that there are no spaces in-between houses and most of these houses have a business run in their property. This is done to generate income through rent because most of these shops are owned by foreigners.

Fig. 7.5: Participants mapping what they found out in their site explorations

Participants are also encouraged to explore what it means to have evidence for statements that we make about the practice and the issues of the practice. This starts to get participants to think beyond their standard statements about a problem and consider what the evidence, in this case the observations and the narratives, are telling us about the situation. This was explored through mapping both onto maps of the physical environment and also mind maps and brainstorming (This was explored again after participants had expanded their explorations beyond the local context). They also identified key questions that they wished to explore further. They were introduced to the idea of a knowledge network where knowledge is not something that is handed down from one person to another but is created in networks of people and contexts. Therefore, it is easier to access knowledge by becoming part of the network where this knowledge is shared and where it has meaning. The participants were encouraged to think about the networks that they already belong to and then to think about how they could extend these. The course also explored how we know if knowledge is trustworthy, reliable and useful.

Imagining new possibilities

The third question (How can we imagine new possibilities?) encourages participants to consider where our minds can take us as we think about how we could change our world and how our actions can follow. What is different about this imagining is that it is not ungrounded but emerges from an authentic and meaningful investigation. We use the word authentic as Paulo Freire uses it where education and learning is about developing a critical consciousness.

Freire describes a valid investigation of the world as a 'dialectic play between ourselves and the world' where critical consciousness means having a 'true grasping of causality which is realised through an experience of and with the world' (Czank, 2012). Being denied agency in Freire's terms means being denied access to knowledge, to the production of knowledge AND to the collective process of knowing and learning through a relationship with the world.

Often we will hear people say that a lack of critical thinking is due to a lack of good education. We disagree. A lack of critical thinking is not a sign of a lack of education; rather it is a sign of mis-education. The course does not attempt to teach people how to be critical but to remove what inhibits their natural ability to question their world (Burt, Lotz-Sisitka, Rivers, Berold, Ntshudu, Wigley and Kruger, 2014).

This is where the participants of this current course are in their explorations. To begin the journey into new possibilities the participants first began pulling together their story into a case study. A key aspect of this next step is that participants begin to work with more and more people. Thus, the meaning that teams have made in relation to their stories is deepened through meaning generated by sharing and reflecting with others who have shared values, but bring new perspectives.

Fig 7.6: How the individual Change Project becomes a catalyst at broader and broader scales

The stories of practice that the individuals engaged with in the course are used as evidence in the development of case studies which are taken up by anchor organisations and within the caucus. For example, their case studies are used by the anchor organisation to develop an action plan. The case studies were presented at the SAWC biennial general meeting and used to discuss future plans and campaigns of the organisation. They were also used to catalyse discussions at a dialogue between SAWC and the DWS. The dialogue focused on what civil society sees as critical issues for DWS to respond to if the NWRS2 is to be implemented fairly and effectively. At this particular meeting, a senior DWS official commented, *The SAWC is well informed*. This informed position generated through the careful and passionate contextual work, and the support of academics and NGOs, paid off in this context. It was also clear, from other comments by governmental staff that they were mostly unaware of the lived experience of people that ran against the intended outcome of policies. This awareness led to new meaning for government officials who were challenged to consider that their policies can (and often do) have a negative impact at local level.

What we have learnt about learning and cognitive justice

The social learning approach adopted in this project brought about change – and in some instances profound transformation – at multiple levels. Through a careful process of observation and reflection, the project provides insights into what changed within individuals, between people, at the level of structure and between people and the natural world. For example, when an activist researcher's confidence was built through gaining a sense of identity based on the deep wisdom inherent in his African ancestry, he discovered agency within himself and was able to articulate concerns to government officials on the importance of including spiritual water users in Catchment Management Forums. This

insight has catalysed ongoing conversation in his organisation and shifted their worldview to include a healing relationship between people and rivers.

The strength of this learning programme is that it is held within an existing movement (SAWC) with the express intention of strengthening the movement. This meant that a lot of sharing and reflecting that happened between course participants, between researchers and course participants, between the participants and other SAWC members and between the participants, provincial water caucuses, anchor organisations and the lead NGO on the project. The level of learning and change that took place depended on the current level of functionality of the different organisations and the level of participation and commitment of the mentors (participants on the course who guided the 'learning away' part of the course) in the SAWC. For example, the Western Cape, Vaal and Mpumalanga groups all had strong SAWC members on the course, who have been active in the caucus for many years. This meant that, to some extent, the mentors saw themselves as leaders not only to their own organisations put in the broader network and considered the work they did on the course as important within this broader network.

Fig. 7.7: The act in activism

The Mpumalanga group were not held as strongly as the other groups because the anchor organisation had recently gone through a difficult transition and was not able to provide as much support as the anchor organisations in Cape Town and the Vaal. In the Eastern Cape, the participants on the course, including the mentor, were new members of SAWC. The anchor organisation was also new to the SAWC although it has been active on water and land issues in the Eastern Cape for many years. Thus, it was both playing a role supporting

the course participants, and exploring a new role of convening Provincial Water Caucus meetings. This challenge of institution building was present for all anchor organisations but played out differently in each Province. More detailed learning on this aspect of the project will follow once course participants, anchor organisations and members of Provincial water caucuses have had a chance to reflect on what has happened.

Another key learning from this course is the importance of embedding learning within a broader movement for social and environmental change. This is acknowledging a core principle of cognitive justice: that knowledge is networked in to the doings and beings of people and the environment. The course, with the help of both the participants, NGO's and researchers, was moulded to encourage participants not to think only about their own case study in their own area but what the findings of the case study and their experiences meant for the movement of social and environmental justice. When thinking of actions participants were encouraged to think not only about actions related to the case study but to actions needed to strengthen solidarity in the movement. This is what is missing from more traditional forms of education and which can be included in more action learning orientated learning processes. Education, for too long, has been viewed as a process to enhance the betterment of an individual. In this case, learning was framed within the collective movement and people were learning for the benefit of the movement as well as for themselves.

What has been challenging is encouraging the participants to work with forms of expression that encourage further dialogue within the communities and networks within which they belong as well as develop a form of communication which holds power and strength in places such as government board rooms and in court. This includes translating these strong cases into policy statements that can have influence beyond the case studies themselves. In this course, we encouraged participants to write in their own languages. Not one participant chose to do so. They argued that the language of power was English and so they had to write in English. This, although possibly true, is disheartening as it shows how a language of a group of people has claimed the space of 'a language that can bring about change and influence.' This needs to be challenged. We also chose to help participants structure their 'stories' or cases according to the traditional standard of presenting cases. This is not necessarily the way in which the participants themselves would have chosen to articulate their stories. Although it helped the participants to think through context, evidence and argument it was difficult for participants to articulate their discoveries and learning in this way. In hindsight, we made a mistake. The strength of a case approach is that it teaches us how to develop an argument based on evidence rather than just on anecdotal or personal experience. It helps us to develop an explanation so as to explain why things are the way they are (Bhaskar, 2010). How this final explanation is presented need not have been in the more traditional form of a case study. Rather, participants could have explored their own ways of articulating their explanations in ways that made sense to them and the people they worked with. This clearly articulated explanation could then have been used to dialogue with more formal, academic ways of presenting knowledge which is the realm of intellectuals and researchers. This dialogue between the cases developed by the

participants, the experiences of the SWAC and researchers and academics is currently happening as the research project progresses and the social learning process, initiated by the course, expands into these broader arenas.

Finally, the course, like all courses based on an action learning ethos, is not expert driven but a dialogic space to introduce ideas of how to read the world which includes context, history and the importance of place (some of which are generated by researchers and other knowledge producers and shared with participants). This was a new experience for many of the participants. One participant, when interviewed about the course, commented, "Other courses like the "X" course someone stands in front of you and tells you what to do. Here we are asked to pull something out and up. It is challenging but it comes from in ourselves." This sense of ownership of knowledge produced and used is the core vision of the course. The knowing that is generated (where generation of knowledge also means being able to draw on many knowledge systems in a meaningful way) belongs with the people who generate it and infiltrates their actions in the places and spaces within which they move. It is hoped that that by the end of this course, the learning and knowledge that is gained by the individuals and the collective will be an authentic expression of the people and landscapes out of which this learning and knowing emerged.

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