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Political Sciences Magazine

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There ain't no party like an S-Club party

Using Legitimation Code Theory to understand and transform knowledge practices in all areas of life



Written by Mathew Toll

One minute it's ballet, the next it's physics, then vocational education, before climate change deniers get their opportunity ... but before long how families choose schools comes into focus, segueing into how jazz is taught, and the creation of Chile's constitution. Sound like chaos?

Somehow all these issues and more are woven together seamlessly every week in 'S-Club', a problem-solving workshop run by the LCT Centre for Knowledge-Building, in the School of Social and Political Sciences. What makes such discussions work in a way that builds knowledge is that all these issues are being explored through the same framework, so everyone speaks the same language. In this case, everyone who attends S-Club uses Legitimation Code Theory or 'LCT', a multidisciplinary and international field whose heart is the LCT Centre.

LCT is a framework for understanding and changing knowledge practices in different areas of social life. It allows people to explore the 'rules of the game' in different fields and to then develop ways of teaching more people to succeed or to change those rules.

A fast-growing community of scholars and educators around the world are using LCT to explore all aspects of education, from pre-school to university, from jazz to journalism, nursing to ballet, as well as beyond education, such as the media, parliamentary procedures, online blogs, and public understanding of science.

The breadth of topics is part of what enables LCT to contribute to knowledge-building; it takes seriously the question of C. L. R. James: "What do they know of cricket who only cricket know"? What do they know of, say, physics or ballet or science that only know that one thing? By bringing together scholars and practitioners from a variety of areas different to one's own, S-Club (and other activities run by the LCT Centre) offers opportunities to learn more about one's own area.

This is timely. Accelerating specialisation of knowledge and proliferating approaches in the academy can make intellectual collaboration difficult. At the same time, it is widely acknowledged that the social, political, economic and environmental issues now facing humanity are 'wicked problems' that require multidisciplinary collaboration.

In this context, the work of the LCT Centre in providing a common language for analyses is invaluable.

It is also a lifeline. As a PhD student I can attest to how isolating an experience research can become. Researching alone can lead to the belief that one's problems are insurmountable or that no one else has had to struggle with them. A weekly workshop can be a lifeline. A regular commitment to meet and work through these problems and a shared theoretical framework to do so gives its members (including myself) a sense of community and a support system.

S-Club – the exact reason for the name is now lost to posterity – does just that. Every week its members meet to discuss the problems they are facing and to work together on solving those issues (... and, in the interests of full disclosure, to eat M&Ms ... a tradition whose provenance also remains wrapped in mystery).

PhD students are confronted with many problems at various stages of their candidature. Engaging with research literature and finding a gap, designing research projects and collecting data, analysing data and writing it up to speak back to the field and wider stakeholders for social impact are steps in the process of inducting PhD students into the tradition of research excellence valued by the School of Social and Political Sciences. S-Club is one of the ways the School is seeking to support this process.

Despite the fact that this is the first time S-Club has been written about anywhere (it is not advertised), students from a wide range of countries have contacted the Centre asking to be involved. The workshop has also attracted academics from the UK (Professor Michael Grenfell from Southampton University) and South Africa (Professor Sioux Mckenna, Rhodes University, and Dr Sherran Clarence, University of Western Cape). The example of S-Club has also proven an inspiration for LCT groups to emerge elsewhere, with over 20 similar groups in China, South Africa, the UK, Mexico and many other countries.

The School is always looking for ways of improving its training of future scholars and practitioners and S-Club is one such development, helping to dissolve social isolation and fragmented languages. A whirl of topics may sound like chaos but it's from this that knowledge of knowledge can be forged. What do we know of knowledge if we only know one form?

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LCT Centre for Knowledge-Building

Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) first emerged as a framework for the study of knowledge and education and is now being used to analyse a growing range of practices across diverse social fields, including education, law, politics, art, and public understanding of science.

– sydney.edu.au/arts/research/lct/

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