

# A new hope: the impact of Legitimation Code Theory in South African education

Using Legitimation Code Theory to 'see' and transform the Cape Peninsula University of Technology curriculum



Industrial engineering academics from Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa: groupwork using LCT to analyse subjects

Written by Karin Wolff

Higher education in South Africa is in crisis. For the third year in a row, protests have begun to emerge on various campuses as we head towards end of year examinations. Students are angry, frustrated, alienated. The system has failed them on so many levels.

Volumes have been written about the origins and manifestations of this crisis. There are special interest groups dedicated to understanding and supporting students in transition from school to university, to stem the dropout tide of over 50% of new enrolments. Government and institutional bodies have constituted one committee of enquiry after another. University management have spent inordinate amounts of time trying to engage students and key stakeholders, some while operating in recently petrol-bombed offices.

But what nobody is talking about is the impact of this crisis on academic staff. The days of collegial

commiseration in staff tearrooms seem long gone. Departmental corridors are silent as staff bury themselves in setting up alternative forms of learning for students who may not be able to get onto campus, or creating hasty revision lectures after weeks of shutdown. My Academic Development (AD) colleagues and I witness the burnout, the tears of hopelessness, the wave of depression that seems to have engulfed the sector. Across higher education institutions in and beyond the South African borders, it is our job as AD professionals to help these valiant academics not only survive, but understand what it is that is happening, and what they can do to change it, in even the smallest of ways.

Given the burden of tackling very real, practical challenges on our campuses, never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that a set of theoretical tools would actually be the answer. I used to be one of the very lecturers I now assist: an intuitive, practice-orientated teacher. I found my initial

journey into postgraduate studies alienating and ivory-towered. I railed against unnecessary jargon and lack of real-world focus. Then I encountered Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), an approach to understanding and changing knowledge and practice created by Professor Karl Maton, from the School of Social and Political Sciences.

When I first met Karl at a symposium in France in 2012, a small group of South African researchers had already ventured into using LCT in an effort to understand the theoretical and practical elements of different qualification levels. Since then, LCT has taken off like a wave across our country with frequent workshops, special symposia and even the First International LCT Conference being held in Cape Town in 2015. We see LCT being applied in innovative educational work in chemistry, biology, law, design, academic literacies and even to examine ‘decolonising’ the curriculum. Despite the geographical distance, many of these South African researchers participate in events as Associate Members of the LCT Centre for Knowledge-Building (located in the School). I, myself, have woken up at 4am to take part in one of the Centre’s famous ‘Roundtables’!

Nowhere has LCT made more of an impact in my context than in understanding the different theory-practice relationships in engineering education. The power of LCT tools to graphically illustrate what’s happening both in and outside of the classroom is unprecedented, and a welcome doorway into educational theory for the engineering academics I assist. Imagine capturing so succinctly the difference between abstract concepts and concrete examples, or between complex and simple meanings, or between fixed and open-ended ways of looking at different kinds of phenomena. These tools were made for engineering.

It was with trepidation that I stepped into the Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in June this year. The entire department had been ordered to participate by their Head, and I saw on their faces the potential resentment. Until, that is, I told them my story. My observations of student learning challenges in the classroom, my feelings of helplessness, what drove me to a PhD on real-world engineering problem solving. And what it was that I had learned from LCT, in particular the concept of different kinds of ‘insights’, which reveal how objects of study and theoretical or methodological procedures shape knowledge in different ways.

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This invaluable tool can reveal kinds of knowledge that are fairly fixed and use common approaches or are open to multiple approaches.

Within two hours of that first workshop, teams were huddled over flipchart paper arguing about the interpretation of core elements of their curriculum. One participant discovered not only that she was teaching the same concept as a fellow colleague from a totally different perspective, but that this was a good thing, and all that was missing was to make these differences clear to the students. Another breakthrough moment was when the department realised that they were focusing heavily on teaching doctrinal methods and the application of these to a few typical situations, but had lost sight of the underpinning principles. They were teaching the ‘how’ and ‘what if’, but without effectively anchoring these in the ‘why’. And it was only because they had used one of the now famous LCT ‘planes’ (a way of representing LCT concepts as a simple diagram) that they could literally see this. And ‘seeing’ is the first step to ‘transforming’.

For a moment in time, theory had provided a much-needed breathing space. A space from which to re-engage with education in South Africa, and collectively grapple with new ideas and new tools. Three workshops down the line, and not a single absence. They are ready and waiting for me when I arrive. They have notebooks and questions, and an incredible sense of purpose. I have no doubt that LCT itself has enabled this transformation, and I hope that in troubled times to come, these academics will continue to empower themselves by embracing theory that can truly transform practices for the benefit of all. They are a team climbing their Everest, and I feel privileged to be their guide.