Review of “Research for the people, by the people: the political practice of cognitive justice and transformative learning in environmental social movements”.

This article investigates the transformative capacity that emerged from a cognitive justice approach to transformative learning. The context was a Changing Practice course for environmental activists. It is a case situated in South Africa – it is the change project ‘Water and Tradition’, developed by Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (VEJA). It explores the relationship between African spiritual practitioners and the highly polluted Vaal River.

The author mobilises the concept of ‘cognitive justice’ which is an important generative concept in the Changing Practice courses. It challenges dominant knowledge hierarchies and allows participants to grapple with the politics of knowledge i.e. whose knowledge counts, when, where and why? The concept is used critically so as to avoid the critiques of ‘cognitive justice’. The author draws on critical realism’s layered reality that accepts that the non-empirical is real. She illustrates this point graphically by using different descriptions of a river.

The article describes the different phases of the Changing Practice course – both its design and facilitation.

The theoretical basis used to show how cognitive justice social action can be enabled by the Changing Practice course change projects, is a critical realist approach to transformational social action, called the transformational model of social activity. The author elaborates beautifully her own cognitive processes, when she says, “I have found that the critical realist epistemological dialectic helps to articulate the transformative learning process by setting out moments where absences can be absented and thus new knowing generated. I have described this as a sequence of changed perspectives……” (p 6)

The author demonstrates a deeply self-conscious approach to teaching and learning. She recruits Carpenter and Mojab who argue that what is required in adult education is a dialectic analysis of the injustices we want to change as well as openness to our learning process that needs to be continually questioned in the light of the contradictions of the social cultural and material world. Both learners and facilitators are encouraged to dig into the contradictions as they arise.

The nub of the investigation of the change project in the Changing Practice course is how spiritual water users should be seen as valuable water custodians and water users, on equal footing with agricultural and industrial users of water. They wanted to know why spiritual water users were not participating in governance forums; what was preventing them. As part of their investigation the participants immersed themselves in the river’s spiritual practices. They advocated for spiritual
water users to be part of decision-making. They recognised how traditional knowledge was being excluded in the narrative as to whose voices should be heard and listened to. This is an excellent example of action research at work.

The case study is carefully analysed using the key questions that had been identified in the construction of the theoretical framework earlier in the article. The author develops a powerful argument when she says: ‘In our case the hesitancy to engage in spiritual knowledge that we as facilitators had learnt through our own educational experiences through school and university needed to be absented from the educational space of the Changing Practice course’. (p16) Both facilitators and participants learnt to welcome indigenous spiritual knowledge into the educational processes. The author recognises the critiques of critical educational theory as ‘being locked in abstracted frames of culture that lack a strong grounding in the materiality of the social world’.

In the analysis, the author points to the reinforcement of cognitive injustice by the modes of academic labour itself.

The author concludes: “By using the critical realist epistemological dialectic and viewing the change projects as transformative social action we can clearly see the value of the VEJA change project both as a catalyst for transformational change within the context of the VEJA change project but also as a catalyst for learning praxis where change projects directly influence how we practice transformative social learning as cognitive justice”.

**In summary:** This is a beautifully crafted, self-conscious and intelligent article which demonstrates deep theoretical understandings which can be recruited to elucidate transformative projects in practice. It challenges assumptions about whose knowledge should count, when, where and why. It is a wonderful example of a scholar-activist at work – I enjoyed reading the work immensely.