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“Values and Commitments: a sociocultural perspective on the new overarching professional standards for teachers, tutors and trainers in the lifelong learning sector”

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1. Standards: a competence perspective

In recent years, standards-based training has been a feature of education reform and government policy in many countries worldwide, including Great Britain, Australia, and the United States (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Smith & Gorard, 2007). The UK government's policy to professionalise the further education (FE) workforce is one example of this ongoing activity. A UK-wide 'Skills for Business' network has been established and Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK, 2007a), one of the network members, was recently commissioned by the government to develop overarching professional National Occupational Standards (NOS) for all those who teach in the Lifelong Learning (LLL) sector. The UK government's commitment to promoting 'Skills for Life' (SfL) is a significant part of this activity. SfL provision involves the teaching of literacy, language and numeracy skills, with a policy emphasis on achieving economic growth and social inclusion (Moser, 1999; Hayward, 2004). Bill Rammell (LLUK, 2007a:i), Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, notes that the new professional standards 'define what we expect of teachers, tutors and trainers in a variety of roles and responsibilities'; the Minister makes clear that the new standards put the 'emphasis on competence'.

LLUK overarching professional standards

(LLUK, 2007a:2)

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Domain A | Professional values and practice |
| Domain B | Learning and teaching |
| Domain C | Specialist learning and teaching |
| Domain D | Planning for learning |
| Domain E | Assessment for learning |
| Domain F | Access and progression |

The LLUK standards are distributed across six domains. LLUK (2007a:3) state that ‘the practice of teaching is underpinned by a set of professional values that should be observed by all teachers, tutors and trainers in all settings’. These professional values, five in number, apply to all six domains and have ‘commitments’ relating to each specific domain. The values, and the associated commitments for Domain A, are listed below. The capital letter ‘S’ (eg AS 1) refers to ‘scope’.

| PROFESSIONAL VALUES | | (LLUK, 2007a:3) |
|--|---|-----------------|
| <i>Teachers in the lifelong learning sector value:</i> | | |
| AS 1 | All learners, their progress and development, their learning goals and aspirations and the experience they bring to their learning. | |
| AS 2 | Learning, its potential to benefit people emotionally, intellectually, socially and economically, and its contribution to community sustainability. | |
| AS 3 | Equality, diversity and inclusion in relation to learners, the workforce, and the community. | |
| AS 4 | Reflection and evaluation of their own practice and their continuing professional development as teachers. | |
| AS 5 | Collaboration with other individuals, groups and/or organisations with a legitimate interest in the progress and development of learners. | |

They are committed to:

AS 6 The application of agreed codes of practice and the maintenance of a safe environment.

AS 7 Improving the quality of their practice.

The overarching LLUK standards apply to different roles in the sector, as described in the ‘application’ document for specific jobs. For example, the table below shows overarching Standard AS4 applied to the role of English (literacy and ESOL) teachers in the lifelong learning sector. The requirements for the value and commitment statements are detailed as ‘elements’.

| | |
|--|---|
| PROFESSIONAL VALUES (LLUK, 2007b:16) | |
| SECTION 1 ELEMENTS | |
| English (literacy and ESOL) teachers in the lifelong learning sector value: | DOMAIN A: PROFESSIONAL VALUES AND PRACTICE |
| Standard AS 4 Reflection and evaluation of their own practice and their continuing professional development as teachers | Element A4.En Engage in professional development relating to international, national and local research into literacy and ESOL. Literacy and ESOL teachers know and understand: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How research into language and literacy, together with teachers’ and learners’ own insights, can |

| | |
|--|--|
| | <p>inform learning and teaching and their own practice. (AK 4.3, AP 4.3)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The relationships between language and literacy policies and initiatives, learning and teaching, and their own practice. (AK 4.3, AP 4.3) |
|--|--|

The standards emphasise professional knowledge, understanding and practice. In the table below, the capital ‘K’=Knowledge, and ‘P’=Practice.

| PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING | PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE |
|--|--|
| <i>Teachers in the lifelong learning sector know and understand:</i> | <i>Teachers in the lifelong learning sector:</i> |
| <p>AK 4.3</p> <p>Ways to reflect, evaluate and use research to develop own practice, and to share good practice with others.</p> | <p>AP 4.3</p> <p>Share good practice with others and engage in continuing professional development through reflection, evaluation and the appropriate use of research.</p> |

LLUK (2007a:4)

The standards-based reforms for teacher education outlined above have a counterpart in the standards and competence-based assessment of students. As described by Wise & Leibbrand (2001:244), the growth of the standards movement in the late 20th century was linked to the demands of the ‘information economy’ which requires

'higher order thinking skills, analytical strategies, and problem-solving ability'; these demands were not being met due to a 'disconnect...between what the schools produced and what society needed'. This same rationale was used by the UK government to justify the introduction of so called 'transferable skills' in the national curriculum. Over the past forty-five years, the UK post-compulsory education and training (PCET) sector has seen considerable importance placed on the development of these skills (e.g. Kelly, 2001). The term is generally understood as referring to a set of generic skills, the possession of which is thought to enable individuals to perform more effectively as learners and to enhance their preparedness for, and effectiveness in, employment (e.g. Hayward & Fernandez, 2004). In 1992, a formal assessment and accreditation system for transferable skills, in the form of 'Core Skills' units, was incorporated into the newly introduced General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs).

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) made clear the importance of core transferable skills to business as a central part of its vision of education and training in a learning society (e.g. Clark, 1996; Sargant et al, 1997). Following recommendations by Dearing (1996) in the 'Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds', Core Skills were re-launched as 'Key Skills'. Dearing (NCIHE, 1997:135) also recommended that all higher education institutions should aim for student achievement in key skills as an outcome for all programmes of learning. Transferable skills are currently reified in the form of the Qualification Curriculum Authority's (QCA, 2005) Key Skills qualifications. The QCA Key Skills qualifications are available from Levels 1 to 5, and comprise Communication, Application of Number, Information Technology, and a further three 'softer' Key Skills: Improving Own Learning and Performance,

Working with Others, and Problem Solving. The government-funded Learning and Skills Development Agency (2003:32), through its Key Skills Support Programme, emphasizes the transferability of Key Skills:

Transferable: Key skills are transferable. This means that once a student has developed a skill for the purpose of one context, they should be able to identify when and how to apply the same skill for another purpose in another context.

As with the LLUK national occupational standards, the Key Skills standards (or specifications), describe what candidates need to know and do in order to meet the required criteria. For example, the extract below sets out the QCA (1999) requirements for the Key Skill of Communication at Level 3 with regard to writing.

| |
|---|
| KEY SKILLS UNIT |
| COMMUNICATION LEVEL 3 |
| Part A: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW |
| <i>In writing documents, YOU NEED TO KNOW HOW TO:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• select appropriate forms for presenting information (<i>eg extended essay or report, images, such as pictures, charts and diagrams</i>) to suit your purpose (<i>eg present an argument, ideas, a complicated line of reasoning or a series of events</i>)• select appropriate styles to suit the degree of formality required and nature of the subject (<i>eg use vocabulary, sentence structures and tone that suit the</i> |

| | |
|---|---|
| <p><i>intended readers and the complexity or sensitivity of the subject</i>);</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> organise material coherently (<i>eg use paragraphs, headings, sub-headings, indentation and highlighting, link information and ideas in an ordered way using words such as ‘however’, ‘therefore’</i>); make meaning clear by writing, proof-reading and re-drafting documents so that spelling, punctuation and grammar are accurate. | |
| <p>Part B: WHAT YOU MUST DO</p> | |
| <p>C3.3</p> <p>Write two different types of documents about complex subjects.</p> <p>One piece of writing should be an extended document and include at least one image.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> select and use a form and style of writing that is appropriate to your purpose and complex subject matter; organise relevant information clearly and coherently, using specialist vocabulary when appropriate; and ensure your text is legible and your spelling, grammar and punctuation are accurate, so your meaning is clear. |
| <p>Part C: GUIDANCE</p> | |
| <p>3.3 Writing</p> <p>Two different documents might include an extended essay or report, with an image such as a chart, graph or diagram and a business letter or memo.</p> | |
| <p>Extract from QCA (1999b) literature on the Key Skills units</p> | |

Elsewhere, the QCA (2002:19) provide further guidance on the meaning of the terms used in the Key Skills units:

Definitions of some important terms used in the specifications

Tutors, assessors and candidates will need to understand several important terms in order to appreciate fully the requirements of some parts of the key skills specifications. To this end, the following definitions should help them to achieve the necessary understanding.

Straightforward subjects and materials are those that candidates often meet in their work, studies or other activities. Content is put across in a direct way with main points being easily identified. Usually, sentence structures are simple and candidates will be familiar with the vocabulary.

Complex subjects and materials present a number of ideas, some of which may be abstract, very detailed or require candidates to deal with sensitive issues. A complex subject may require candidates to deal with the relationship of ideas and lines of enquiry dependent on clear reasoning, where these relationships may not be immediately clear. As well as having a number of strands, the subject matter must be challenging to the candidate in terms of the ideas it presents. Specialised vocabulary and complicated sentence structures may be used.

As with the LLUK standards, the design and philosophy underlying the QCA Key Skills framework can be traced back to the competence movement (e.g. Wolf, 1995). Eraut (1994:187) quotes the Employment Department's formal definition of competence as 'a wide concept which embodies the ability to transfer skills and knowledge to new situations within the occupational area'. A leading proponent in the promotion of the competence movement in the UK was Jessup, who promoted a framework for education and training with core transferable skills as a central element

permeating all levels. Jessup (1991:85-86) made clear the centrality of transferable, core skills within his vision of a national qualification framework (NQF): 'Irrespective of the route or place of learning, all young people will be expected to develop common core skills. This will help to align the systems and facilitate transfer between them'. The idea of competence is central not only to the philosophy but also to the assessment of transferable skills (e.g. Lambert and Lines, 2000). QCA Key Skills candidates attempt to demonstrate competence in their transferable skills by producing portfolios of Key Skills evidence and by taking Key Skills examinations.

2. Standards: a sociocultural perspective

Socio-cultural approaches to understanding education and training can provide an alternative perspective on lifelong learning and workforce development that is not standards or competence-based or skills-led in its analysis of the issues (e.g. Deignan, 2006; Hamilton et al, 2006). Teaching and learning can be treated as activity that is socially situated involving communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Engestrom, 2003). Roth & Lee (2006:27) note that the concept of 'communities of practice' originates from 'a cultural-historical theory of activity, or, as Lev Vygotsky called it, in a "concrete human [social] psychology"'. Similarly, Guile & Young (1998:185) note that both Engestrom and Wenger regard learning as a fundamentally social and reflexive process. This recognition, integral to the approaches of both activity theory and the social theory of learning involved in communities of practice, offers the possibility of reframing the current debate with regard to standards such as those reified in the QCA Key Skills and LLUK NOS.

Activity theory is grounded in the notion that human beings use tools to work on an object, or ‘problem space’, in order to achieve a desired outcome (Engestrom, 1993). The motive of a collective activity system, according to Engestrom (2000:964), is ‘embedded in the object of the activity’. Accordingly, the workforce may be seen from a government perspective as carrying the cultural motive of tackling a need for professionalisation and skills development in order to promote LLL, employment skills, social inclusion and economic growth (see figure 1 below).

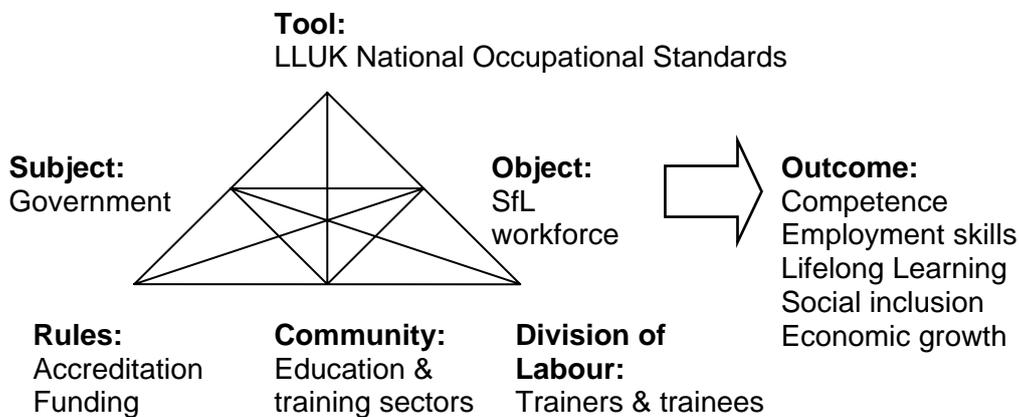


Figure 1: Object-oriented activity within the activity system (after Engestrom 2003:31)

In a similar way, transferable skills development may be seen from an activity theory perspective, with the workforce as the object of the activity system. Learners or trainees who are or will become members of the workforce are seen as problematic in that their competence is perceived as being potentially compromised by a skills deficit. We see the learner therefore, from a government policy perspective, as the object of education and training activity. The learner is thus a generalized learner, and one that carries the cultural motive of tackling the problem of underskilled workers, actual and potential, by developing their personal effectiveness and employability

through transferable skills development. This dynamic is represented in Figure 2 below, with government again shown in the subject position.

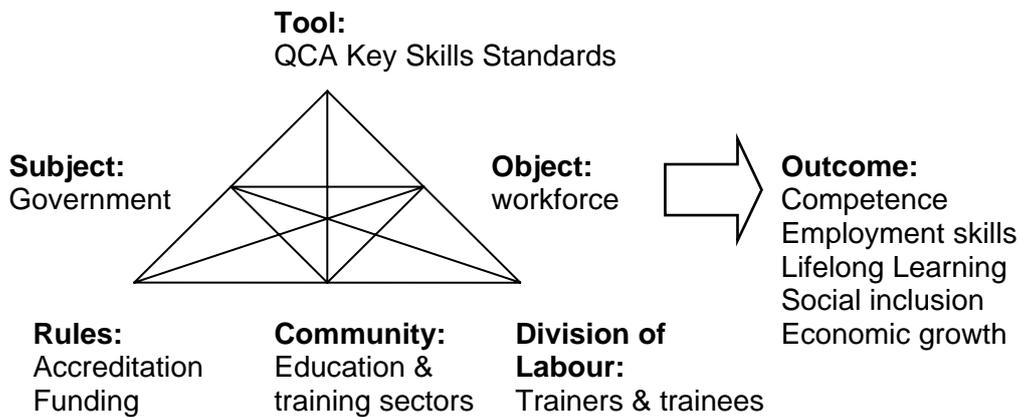


Figure 2: Object-oriented activity within the activity system

In figures 1 and 2 above, students and teachers occupy the object or ‘problem space’. This is consistent with the problematization of students and teachers by proponents of the standards-based assessment of learning outcomes. Cochran-Smith (2004:208) notes that ‘the tendency has been to devolve blame for the ‘failures’ of public education to the local level (schools, teachers, and teacher education programs) while at the same time over-regulating the content of education’. Cochran-Smith (2004:206) suggests that there is an ‘unspoken premise that teachers and teaching, teacher educators and teacher education, are critical components – arguably *the* critical components – in school change’. In line with this perspective, Figure 3 below represents the intended function of the activity system with regard to standards in general as an instrument of government policy.

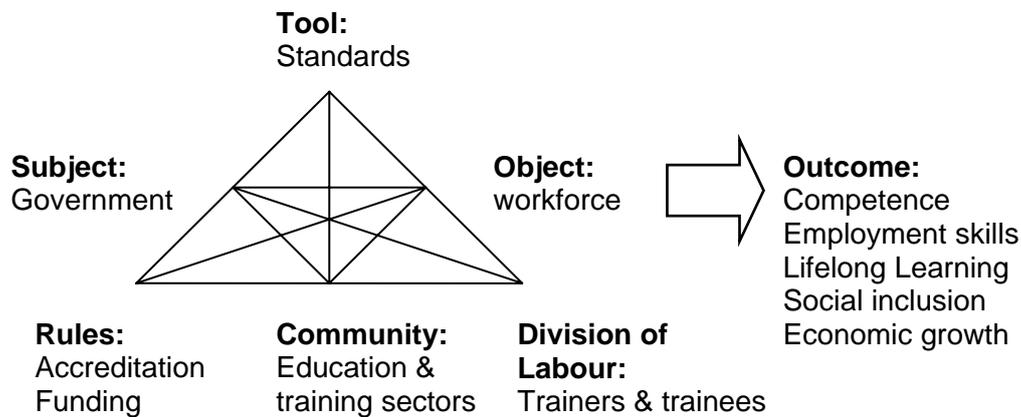


Figure 3: Object-oriented activity within the activity system

Standards are undoubtedly a key tool in government policy for education reform. However, what is known about the theoretical basis underlying the development of these standards and their fitness for purpose? Delandshere & Petrosky (2004:12) comment that, ‘the standards-based reform movement in teacher education generally lacks explicit theoretical articulation, and little empirical evidence exists concerning its impact on teaching and learning. Similarly, Apple (2001:183) challenges the ‘weak’ research base on which standards-based reforms are based and argues that the motives of the standards movement ‘may not guarantee what the effects of such policies will be in the real world of real schools...such reforms may have consequences that will be quite dangerous unless we situate our efforts within an honest analysis of what is happening in education in general right now’.

On the question of research evidence to support their development, Bill Rammell’s Ministerial Foreword to the LLUK (2007a:I) standards reassures readers that ‘in

developing the standards, LLUK has consulted extensively, holding consultation events, focus groups, web based questionnaires and meetings with individual stakeholders and the new standards command broad support from the system'. However, the document does not refer the reader to any publication which might detail how this consultation process was carried out, or how the data gathered were used to inform the design of the standards. Similarly, the standards application document (LLUK, 2007b:6) for teachers of English states that the terminology employed 'has been supported through consultation...the terms...have been found to be useful...developed in consultation with the field and reflects the experience of teacher trainers and trainees'. Again, the reader is not referred to any specific publication which provides details of the consultation process.

3. Standards: an interrogation

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2004:44) stress it is important 'that students, employers and the educational sector can have confidence in the rigour and appropriateness of awards'. As someone with experience of working in the lifelong learning sector, I chose to investigate the UK standards as reified in the QCA Key Skills qualifications. My PhD thesis (Deignan 2006) considered the efficacy of 'transferable skills' initiatives as an instrumental tool of government policy in the UK post-compulsory education and training sector (PCET). Commentators have expressed concerns regarding a lack of empirical research relating to transferable skills initiatives, and especially with regard to the perceptions of students and lecturers. My study set out to address this gap, and to consider the implications of the

findings for practice and policy design. An empirical enquiry was conducted which investigated two transferable skills initiatives in two PCET contexts. A study in nine colleges of Further Education (FE) investigated teaching staff views on the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) Key Skills qualifications. A study in Higher Education (HE) considered the key skill of 'learning to learn' (Dearing, 1996), investigating staff and student views on the study skills support provision offered within a faculty of education. A comparative case-study approach was used, involving a total of 367 participants across the ten institutions. Common methods, involving a blend of R-methodology and Q-methodology (Stephenson, 1953; Brown, 1980), were used in order to facilitate a cross-case analysis.

The FE study participants criticised the design and the effectiveness of the QCA Key Skills qualifications which, as outlined above, depend on the competence-based assessment of learning outcomes. In the HE study by contrast, staff perceived by students as providing effective study skills support characterized their provision as following a holistic process model that resisted the idea of itemised competences. These findings suggest that transferable skills initiatives which depend on competence-based assessment of learning outcomes do not respect sufficiently the complexity of teaching, learning and assessment. The data from the FE questionnaire survey of Key Skills staff showed that the survey participants (N=100) were generally very supportive of the principle of developing students' transferable skills. However, the participants were very critical of the value of the QCA Key Skills qualifications as a means to achieving that end. Of the one hundred Key Skills staff who completed and returned the questionnaire, seventy-nine agreed that the reputation of the QCA Key Skills qualifications is seriously damaged. Seventy-eight felt that there are

problems with the purpose and design of the qualifications. Fifty-six felt that the Key Skills qualifications lack a clear underpinning theory of learning. Sixty-six felt that the Key Skills qualifications are not appropriate to the needs of individual students. Eighty-five felt that students do not value the Key Skills qualifications. Seventy-four felt that the learning outcomes resulting from Key Skills provision are disproportionate to the effort being invested, and sixty-four disagreed with the suggestion that the Key Skills qualifications are justified by their outcomes and results. Seventy-eight felt that the administration workload associated with Key Skills is unreasonable. Sixty-two felt that the complexity of implementing the Key Skills qualifications makes them unworkable in practice. Sixty-seven felt that the difference between 'Key Skills' and 'Basic Skills' is not clear. Seventy-six felt that the Key Skills specifications are not clear. Seventy-eight felt that the terminology of the Key Skills qualifications is not clear. Sixty-two felt that the Key Skills qualifications are too prescriptive. Fifty-eight felt that the differentiation between the Key Skills levels is not clear. Seventy-two felt that the evidence requirements for students' portfolios are not clear. Fifty-eight felt that the Key Skills external tests are not well designed. Sixty-eight felt that Key Skills are not taken seriously by universities. Sixty-six felt that the main benefit of the Key Skills qualifications to education and training providers is the funding they attract. Sixty-three felt that the Key Skills qualifications have more to do with political agendas than with teaching and learning. Seventy felt that the Key Skills qualifications have not been subjected to sufficient critical evaluation. Sixty-two disagreed with the suggestion that the Key Skills qualifications only need some minor adjustments, and seventy felt that the Key Skills qualifications need to be overhauled. The extracts below from participants' written comments on the

returned questionnaires are indicative of the criticisms made of the Key Skills standards and awards.

“The specifications are not clear...to a certain extent it can be a guessing game.” (participant 7)

“I really bought the concept and theory. In practice I feel that they are far too woolly for most students.” (19)

“The principle of input on ‘key’ or transferable skills is a good one. In practice, the Communication Key Skill does not support students’ learning or development of these skills – a lot of time is spent evidencing skills students already have.” (9)

“The key skills of learning are not really encouraged by the restrictive criteria of Key Skills qualifications. Students, employers and universities have no respect for the Key Skills qualifications.” (8)

“This is my first year as a Key Skills tutor at an FE college. Even as an incurable idealist, I began the term slightly sceptical about the prescriptive nature of the Key Skills criteria and the vagueness of terms such as ‘straightforward’ or ‘complex’. And meeting the eleven different groups scheduled for Key Skills Communications on my weekly timetable soon deepened these misgivings.” (94)

“Summer 2002 – all failed – very strict external moderator with idiosyncratic interpretation of criteria.” (98)

“They are an administrative nightmare and the paperwork required for evidencing the skills must have deforested half of the UK!!” (32)

“The limited outcomes and results are not commensurate with the huge administrative demands of implementing the key skills qualifications. I’m running out of answers to the question frequently posed by students – ‘Why bother??’” (22)

“Because Key Skills qualifications are seen, by management, as primarily an income generator, the educational qualities are lost.” (11)

“I think students are really just producing work in a mechanical fashion – urged just to complete key skills for funding purposes.” (6)

“I have recently been conducting ‘exit’ interviews with A2 students...all of them said that they hated Key Skills and could see no benefit from them...As an A Level lecturer and Key Skills lecturer I agree with the students.” (72)

“I have taught...for 28 years and thoroughly enjoyed doing so...[Key Skills] are the worst 16-18 qualifications in the world...The enormous amount of

turgid nit-picking paperwork and gathering of meaningless evidence which proves absolutely nothing is a national joke.” (59)

The study of subjectivity was a central element of my doctoral study in relation to different perspectives on the Key Skills qualifications. Q methodology (Stephenson, 1935, 1953; Brown, 1980) was chosen for this purpose as it offered a theoretical basis for understanding the diversity of views involved. Q methodology has been used increasingly in a wide range of subject areas, with studies reported in numerous academic journals. As described by Brown (1980:5), ‘Q technique and its methodology...was designed to assist in the orderly examination of human subjectivity’. Brown (1997:14) describes the purpose of Q as being, ‘to enable the person to represent his or her vantage point...for inspection and comparison’. Procedurally, the research study participants represented their viewpoints by rank ordering (or ‘sorting’) a set of statements (or ‘Q-sample’). The Q-sample was developed from a ‘concourse’ of diverse views drawn from a range of sources including the academic literature and interviews with individuals from a range of backgrounds with personal experience of the Key Skills standards and related provision.

Q methodology refers to the use of Q-sorting, which is a data collection technique, and Q-factor analysis, a procedure for statistical analysis. McKeown & Thomas (1988:17) emphasise the fact that, in Q methodology, ‘variables are the people performing the Q-sorts, not Q-sample statements’. Likewise, Brown (1980:6) notes that, ‘the resultant factors point to...persons bearing family resemblances in terms of

subjectively shared viewpoints'. With regard to its general applicability, Van Eten (1999:395-396) argues that Q methodology can identify stakeholders' arguments without forcing a specific problem definition upon them: 'Q-methodology is especially suited to the task of uncovering positions really held by participants in a debate rather than accepting decision-makers', analysts', or even the participants' predefined categories'. Van Eeten (1999:392) suggests further that 'an in-depth analysis of the stakeholders' arguments and their relations, applying Q-methodology, can be used to come to an action-forcing reconception of a controversy.

In relation to modeling different perspectives, Engestrom (2003:20) argues for a multi-voiced theory of activity in which internal 'contradictions' and debates are an essential focus of analysis. Kangasoja (2002:200) describes such contradictions as, 'the driving force of development. They are manifest in the daily practices as breakdowns, tensions, ruptures and innovations. They call for reworking, both conceptually and very concretely, the objects and motives that sustain the activity, and for re-mediating the activity system by way of improving and inventing new tools'. Engestrom (2003:32) notes that actions involve 'failures, disruptions and unexpected innovations', and recommends analyzing the entire activity system in order to 'illuminate the underlying contradictions that give rise to those failures and innovations as if "behind the backs" of the conscious actors'. Consistent with this multi-voiced theory, Q methodology was used to model the subjectivities of the study participants. Three factors, or mind-sets were interpreted.

Factor 1 viewpoint

The members of Factor 1 were extremely critical of the QCA Key Skills qualifications. They felt that Key Skills accreditation involves ‘tick-box’ learning rather than the deep learning of skills. They felt strongly that stakeholders should be consulted about education initiatives, but that they as practitioners had not been properly consulted in the design of the Key Skills qualifications. They felt that the Key Skills qualifications do not respect the needs of teaching staff, and they believed that students do not value the Key Skills qualifications. They felt that government funding is the sole factor supporting any level of commitment in the sector to learning provision leading to Key Skills qualifications. They rejected strongly the suggestion that the Key Skills qualifications should be allowed to continue as they are. The mind-set of Factor 1 was different from the other two factors identified in its strong agreement with the view that the Key Skills qualifications are a function of an education system that is obsessed with accreditation. This feeling was evident in the post-sort interview comments from Factor 1 members:

“Education is obsessed with accreditation because the government uses it as a measure of quality.” (participant 001)

“There is just this obsession with an audit culture, and Key Skills seems to be, I can’t think of the right word for it, almost the sort of Nirvana of it. It’s sort of set up to do accreditation as opposed to doing anything else. It is all it seems to be there for. It is absolutely all-pervading now. The only thing it is not completely grabbing yet is HE but it is happening in HE as well. I just think the accreditation, and the whole audit culture that goes with it, is

fundamentally wrong, and just needs to be completely rethought. It just doesn't work.” (043)

Factor 2 viewpoint

The members of Factor 2 were actually supportive of the Key Skills qualifications and were strongly against the idea of scrapping them. They believed that Key Skills are best practised in a vocational context. However, they also felt strongly that vocational tutors do not have the training needed to deliver Key Skills successfully. When making educational policy decisions, they felt strongly that the government should seek the advice of those who will be affected. The mind-set of Factor 2 is different from the other two factors identified in its agreement with the view that Key Skills accreditation is a good way of assessing students' transferable skills. The views of Factor 2 members were further evidenced in the post-sort interview comments:

“If they're working toward accreditation, I think it's good for the students that haven't previously got qualifications. They like getting a qualification...they mightn't have got anything at school but they certainly want to come out with something in FE, and if Key Skills is a way of gaining that, and albeit if it's Level 1 or whatever it is, they still gain something and they've been accredited with it to say, “Yes, you can do this”, and I think it's most important...some of them have been delighted that they've gained a qualification...they've proven it...and if you can liken it to their vocational area especially, well it makes a lot of difference to them.” (037)

“It does help to develop their skills. Not only their every day skills but it also helps their confidence and self-esteem. And I definitely don’t believe their Key Skills qualification is a lower qualification than their main qualification. I personally feel it’s alongside and they basically compliment each other.” (010)

Factor 3 viewpoint

The members of Factor 3 felt strongly that education should involve developing learners’ personal effectiveness in both their social and professional lives, and should not simply extend their knowledge base. However, they felt strongly that students do not want Key Skills imposed on them; students want to study subjects that they themselves have chosen. They felt strongly that students do not value Key Skills programmes. Furthermore, they believed strongly that not only students but also FE staff, employers and universities have little or no respect for the Key Skills qualifications. The mind-set of Factor 3 is different from the other two factors identified in relation to qualification equivalence and fraud. Regarding the equivalence of qualifications, they disagreed strongly that a Level 2 Key Skills qualification is as difficult to achieve as a grade C in a GCSE subject. They argued strongly that Key Skills programmes do not safeguard academic standards. They believed strongly that the evidence demands that Key Skills portfolios place on tutors result in fraudulent practices. However, despite their serious reservations about Key Skills, they felt that it would be wrong to scrap the qualifications. The factor 3 mind-set was further evidenced in the post-sort interview comments made by its members:

“I don’t think the Key Skills Communication qualification is as difficult as getting a ‘C’ at GCSE English. I just don’t think it is. I think the GCSE, in my

experience, is more difficult, plus the fact that I think you get more cracks of the whip with Key Skills, more attempts.” (042)

“I’m afraid there is widespread cynicism and a lack of respect. Although the system has been tinkered with, it doesn’t seem to have improved, often it is made worse...Anything that involves continuous assessment, this is a maths teacher speaking, it is as inevitable as night follows day that you’ll get fraud. It’s inevitable.” (003)

“Definitely. I think there’s been a lot of fudging of the figures, definitely. People, the lecturers, are practically doing the work for them...I can see how a lot of people do it, push them through, definitely.” (042)

“It’s so easy to do isn’t it? Absolutely, it is far too easy to cheat in the portfolio.” (013)

In summary, the findings of the doctoral study outlined above revealed widespread dissatisfaction among staff with the Key Skills standards and the associated qualifications. The minority of staff who were supportive of Key Skills justified this in part because of the sense of achievement that students got from being awarded a certificate. However, the overall findings of the study are consistent with those of the Smith Inquiry (2004:91) into Post-14 Mathematics Education; the Report noted that evidence from Key Skills provider institutions to the Inquiry suggested that, ‘...there is a widespread perception...that being in possession of an AoN [Key Skills

Application of Number] qualification rarely results in candidates having transferable mathematics skills of any worth'. Commentators outside the UK have also expressed concerns about the standards and competence-based assessment of transferable skills. For example, Williams (2005:46), writing about the Australian 'Key Competencies' framework, describes the persistent difficulties, despite successive reviews, of translating generic skills policy into practice:

...inconsistencies, which emerge on a close reading of these documents...will create stumbling blocks to implementation of the proposed skills frameworks, and would require clarification in any further development of the frameworks. This is not to say, however, that these inconsistencies would actually be resolved by further efforts at clarification and better classification...in relation to concepts of 'skill' and 'competence'...such efforts will only provoke a further discursive explosion, producing the same confusion and indeterminacy.

Despite the difficulties described above, the standards-based assessment of workforce competence is clearly an attractive concept to many governments. Hodgson et al (2007:318) suggest that 'policy-makers rely predominantly on quantitative research, which they hope will produce 'killer facts' for short-term policy-making, rather than grappling with the subtleties often unearthed by qualitative research'. Drawing on research from national qualification frameworks (NQFs) worldwide, Young (2003:236) warns that 'the goals of social transformation easily become indistinguishable from the means of achieving it – the NQF'. In terms of activity

theory, the difficulties experienced and described by the Key Skills staff point to contradictions arising within the activity system, as shown below in Figure 4.

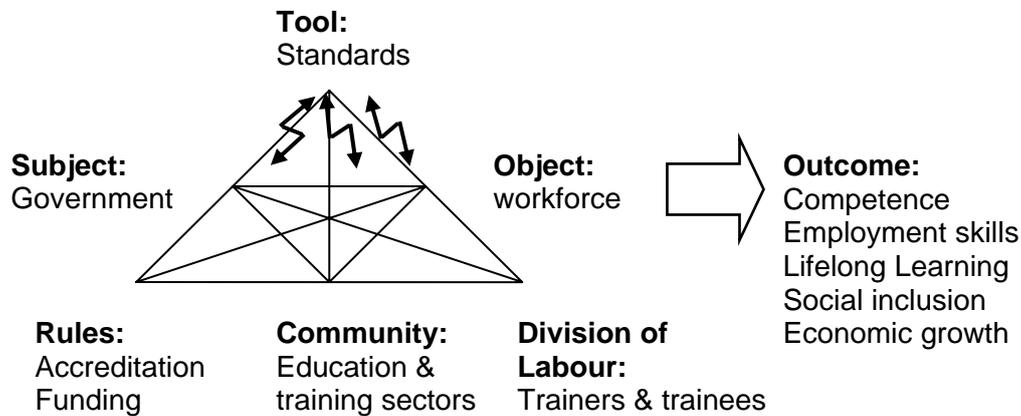


Figure 4: Object-oriented activity with 'contradictions' (indicated by lightning bolts) in the activity system

Following Engestrom (2003), the lightning – shaped arrows above between the tool (or mediating artefact) and other elements indicate contradictions between central components of the activity system. As Young (2003) suggests, the means and the goal – or from an Activity Theory perspective, the tools and the outcome - can become easily confused. The accreditation of Key Skills is indisputable. Phil Hope (2007:12), the UK government Minister for Skills has noted that, to date, over two million Key Skills qualifications have been awarded. What that accreditation actually means in terms of what is being achieved other than the issuing of Key Skills certificates is less clear. With regard to Key Skills, findings from the study suggest that there is a disconnect between the intended and the actual outcomes of the system. In fact the only sure outcome of the present activity system may be accreditation, as depicted in Figure 5 below.

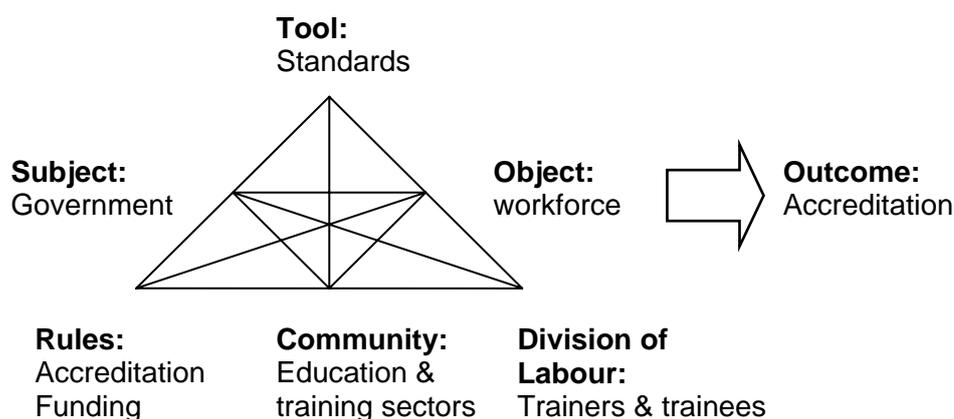


Figure 5: Minimal function of the activity system?

Approaches which privilege standards and the competence-based assessment of performance have long had their critics. Barnett (1994:178) argues that, ‘to reduce human action to a constellation of terms such as ‘performance’, ‘competence’, ‘doing’ and ‘skill’ is not just to resort to a hopelessly crude language with which to describe serious human endeavours. In the end, it is to obliterate the humanness in human action. It is to deprive human beings of human being’. Similarly, Beyer (2002:310) expresses his ‘disdain’ for competence and standards-based teacher education which, he argues, ‘is in considerable measure a renewed search for an old dream: the pursuit of certain and replicable results’. Delandshere & Petrosky (2004:12) argue that, ‘it will lead to the preparation of teachers whose understandings of teaching and learning are fragmented and atomistic, like the standards from which they derive, rather than conceptually or theoretically coherent’.

Hodgson et al (2007:328) argue that ‘by problematizing learners rather than the system, policy-makers avoid having to confront wider reform’. Cochran-Smith

(2004:208) warns that 'if we do not take control of framing the outcomes question in teacher education, then the outcomes question will surely frame us'. Similarly, Delandshere & Petrosky (2004:12) comment that, 'as teacher educators uncritically participate in the standards-based movement, it becomes impossible for them to conceive of teaching and education outside of the framework provided to them by the standards'.

4. Standards: not the only tool

The standards-based assessment of workforce competence is problematic. To address the difficulties described, in my thesis (Deignan, 2006) I propose reframing the object as perceived by policy-makers in a way that privileges the notion of 'transferable people' rather than standards for transferable skills. Similarly, rather than focusing on the competence-based assessment of skills, the thesis instead proposes developing the competence of the system to support individuals more effectively within and across sites of work and learning. To this end, a method is proposed for systematically incorporating the study of subjectivity as found in the range of perspectives within communities of practice, so as to improve the development of tools and individuals within the activity system. The approach, blending Q-methodology, activity theory (Engestrom, 2003) and communities of practice concepts (Wenger, 1998), is intended to allow the system to know itself better and to adapt more effectively to the needs of those it is meant to serve.

The understanding of subjectivity is particularly relevant to both Activity Theory and the communities of practice literature. Lave and Wenger (1991:113) regard multiple viewpoints as a characteristic feature of participation in a CoP. They describe how ‘objective forms and systems of activity, on the one hand, and agents’ subjective and intersubjective understandings of them, on the other, mutually constitute both the world and its experienced forms’ (1991:51). Q methodology can be used to investigate and illuminate multiple perspectives on the standards debate. The use of Q methodology also addresses a significant scholarship gap in that subjectivity has been under-theorized in activity theory literature to date. For example, Engstrom (2000:305) emphasises the importance of making manifest the multi-voicedness inherent in a collectively constructed activity system, but acknowledges that a methodological approach for analyzing the perspectives involved has been lacking. Similarly, Roth et al (2004:51-52) suggest that subjectivity is an important but overlooked feature of activity-theoretic studies, and emphasise the importance of a better understanding of subjective realities in activity systems. The approach I suggest here, using Q methodology, addresses this gap by specifically exploring the subjectivity in activity systems within LLL contexts (see Figure 6 below).

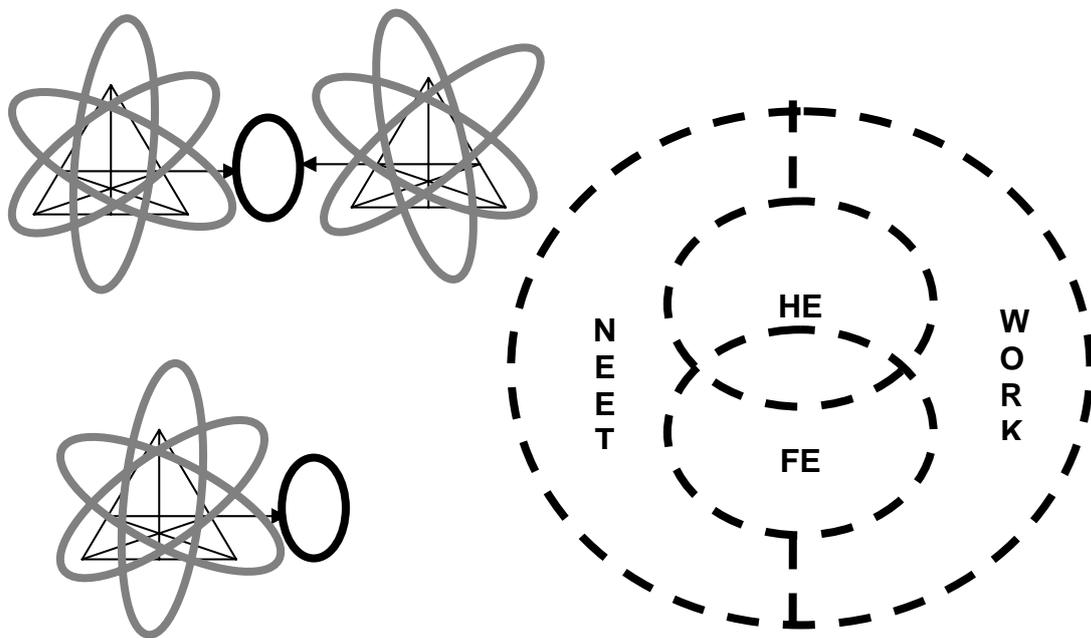


Figure 6: Activity systems with associated subjectivity and sites of educational activity within the lifelong learning sector (Deignan, 2006)

Key: HE: Higher Education; FE: Further Education; NEET: Not in Employment, Education or Training

In Figure 6 above, the familiar triangular shapes with ovals represent the activity systems and their objects, while the grey circular orbital shapes represent the subjectivity that may be revealed in the communities of practice within the activity system. The concepts of ‘communities of practice’ and ‘activity systems’, when combined, may in some ways offer a stronger analytical model in terms of understanding and supporting learning as it occurs within and across sites. Additionally, as part of the blend with Activity Theory and CoP, Q-methodology may serve to reveal the structure of subjectivity within those sites, communities, and

systems. Thus Activity Theory when combined with Q-methodology, and, drawing on the social theory of learning as described by Wenger, may constitute a complex tool which itself may be used to generate other tools which will enhance the transfer and development of whole people, including teachers and students, across and within sites of work and learning (see Figure 7 below). In essence, the model proposed here is that of a composite, generic 'tool-making tool' which may be applied in various sociopsychological sites of work and learning. Salient issues that may be illuminated include boundary-crossing (Beach, 2003; Deignan, 2006), and the relationship between interacting activity systems such as SfL teacher training programmes in HE and SfL provision in FE colleges, work-based learning and other contexts.

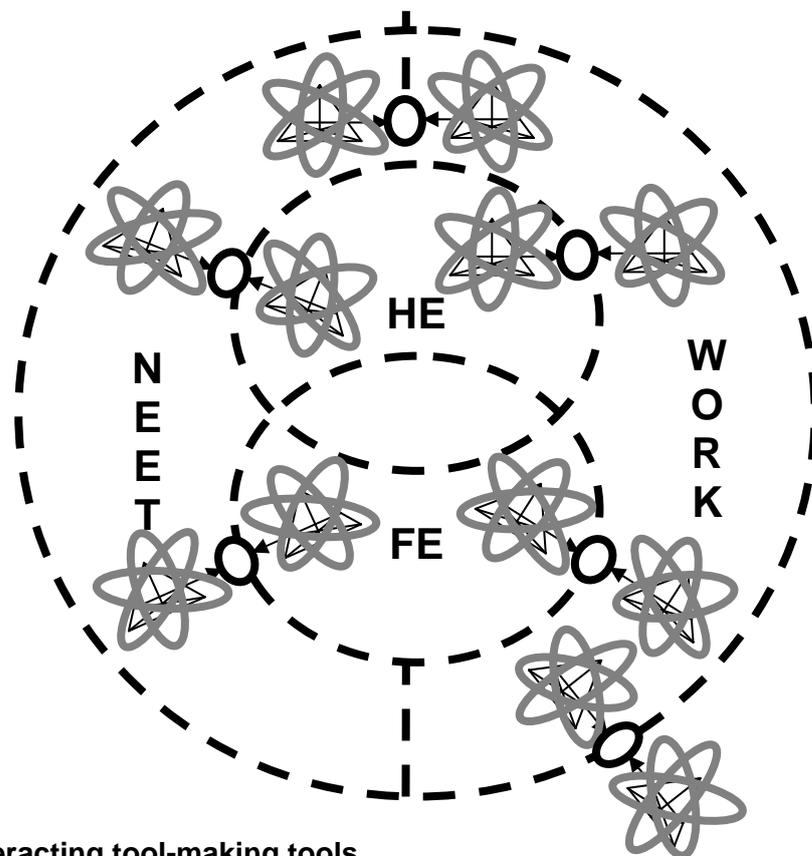


Figure 7: Interacting tool-making tools

The subjectivity may be investigated and used to inform the development of new tools which could increase the probability of achieving the goals of the activity. Engestrom (2004) suggests that the minimal unit of analysis should include two interacting activity systems in their network relations. Two or more of these interacting tool-making tools, combining activity theory with Q-methodology and drawing on Wenger's social theory of learning, may be incorporated into the sociopsychological framework developed thus far. Thus, wherever there is practice within an activity system, the tool-making tool, in a single, dual or multiple application, may be deployed in order for the communities of practice to learn from the revealed subjectivity in the system and to enhance the balance of participation and reification as it relates to tool production. This process may involve evaluating current tools (such as the QCA Key Skills or LLUK National Occupational Standards) and developing improved or new generation tools for use as mediating artifacts by the communities of practice within the activity system.

As Davydov (1995:18) notes in relation to education, 'much in practice depends on what theoretical positions teachers and scholars are able to take'.

Similarly, Engestrom (2003:29) notes the central role of mediation in activity theory and cites Wartofsky's (1979:205) view that, "the artefact is to cultural evolution what the gene is to biological evolution". Individual and collective practice in human activity includes what Wenger (1998:58) describes as a process of 'reification', where 'we create points of focus around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organized'. The approach I propose could reveal different viewpoints on Skills for Life development in the Lifelong Learning sector and how their subjectivities are shaped by the contexts in which they are found. For example, Skills for Life

professionals in different contexts may perceive differently the National Occupational Standards as a tool to mediate their practice. Sociocultural analysis of their subjectivities, as revealed by Q methodology and applying Activity Theoretical and ‘communities of practice’ concepts, could contribute to improved understanding and development of activity in different contexts. Such analysis could lead to new models of activity, including new artefacts, being designed collaboratively to develop existing practice.

The proposed approach is consistent with Ozga’s (2000:128) belief that we can contribute to our understanding of education policy through ‘documentation and analysis of the ‘voices’ of the major ‘actors’ in the system’, and that ‘complex realities can be modelled and applied in ways that may be widely understood’ (2000:81). The collectivity and subjectivity associated with such lived ‘complex realities’, as revealed by Q methodology, are relevant both to activity theory and to communities of practice. Wenger (1998:14) argues that ‘connecting the formation of collectivity and the experience of subjectivity... highlights the inseparable duality of the social and the individual’. Jenlink (2001:350), writing on activity theory and the design of educational systems, argues that ‘the embodiment of participant’s subjectivity is a critical element of the social change or transformation process’, and comments (2004:358) that, ‘stakeholder subjectivity is recognized as a primary tool in the generative process of creating an ‘ideal’ system. Engestrom (2001:137) comments that, ‘an expansive transformation is accomplished when the object and motive of the activity are reconceptualized to embrace a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of the activity’. With regard to desired outcomes, Nardi (1996:7) emphasizes that in their research, ‘activity theorists from the outset have addressed

practical needs'. To that end, the approach described could also contribute significantly to knowledge by using sociocultural theory and Q methodology to inform international debate on standards-based teacher education reform.

5. Conclusion

The LLUK (2007a:2) standards state that “teachers in the lifelong learning sector...strive for continuous improvement through reflective practice”. I believe that teachers and other educational tool-users should critically evaluate and contribute to the improvement of their education system. As Cochran-Smith (2004:13) suggests, ‘ethical commitment, political engagement, and theoretical understandings are at the core of teaching and are grounded in particular cultural and community values’. Engestrom (2001:138) argues that, ‘in important transformations of our personal lives and organizational practices, we must learn new forms of activity which are not yet there. They are literally learned as they are being created. There is no competent teacher.’ In this regard, the approach I have outlined above (see also Figure 8 below) is one which acknowledges and respects what Apple (2001:188) describes as the ‘situation-specific and qualitative understanding that is grounded in the lived experience of teachers in real schools’.

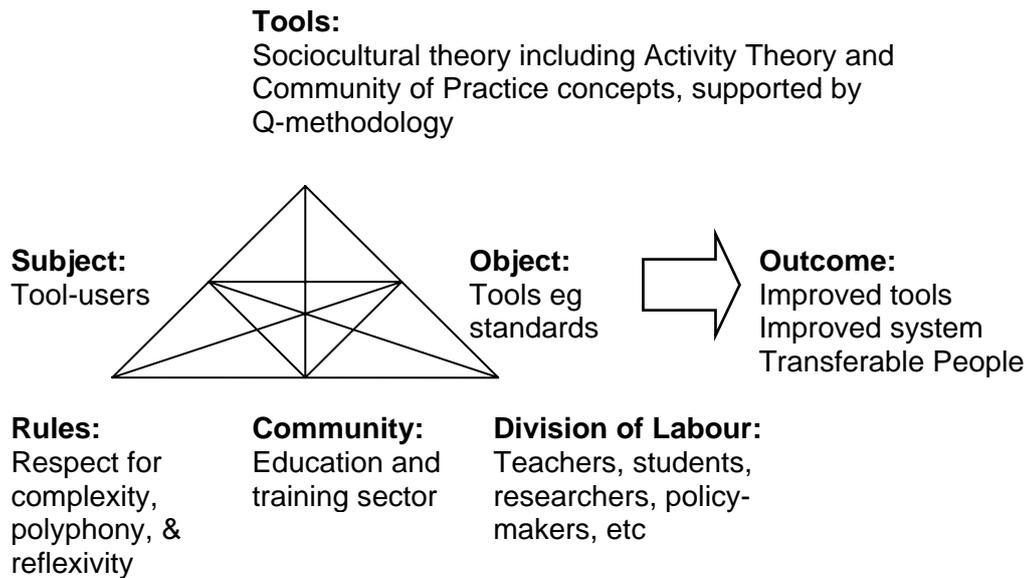


Figure 8: Re-tooling the activity system

Effective education and training must involve development and, as one educator interviewed for my doctoral study commented, ‘at the end of the day, all academic training is training some people to some degree to be subversive, to question and doubt the things that they are being told in a matter of fact way’. This paper has questioned the efficacy and the limitations of standards as a reification of government policy in relation to workforce development. As Tarrant (2000) suggests, the implications of this reification for the nature of education include unavoidable epistemological, ethical, and political considerations. I believe that these considerations can be acknowledged and the effectiveness of education can be improved by incorporating CHAT methodologies at multiple levels to better align theory, research, policy and practice.

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