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Building Academic Support in Preservice Teacher Education Using Peer Tutors: An Educational Action Research Project¹

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors report on the process of designing and implementing an academic support programme using peer tutors at a newly established rural university. The need for support for the development of first-year preservice student teachers' English language academic proficiency motivated the programme. In educational action research mode, the authors tracked changes and improvements to the programme and its implementation over a four-year period. Data in the form of questionnaires, interviews, video recorded lessons, and observations were generated in four cycles to inform reflections and new actions. The data were analysed using procedures associated with content analysis, and interpreted through the lens of cultural historical activity theory. The results show that competing tensions and a lack of focus on a shared object initially led to a delay in building shared knowledge in the beginning of the project. The authors interpret the results from a CHAT perspective and show the value of these tensions for identifying levers of change in a developmental process in the project. In this respect, the missteps of the researchers led to multiple iterations of reflection and action in order to arrive at a shared object, while defining the legitimacy of mediating tools, organisation of division of labour, and effective rules in a higher education programme.

Keywords: academic proficiency, academic support programme, cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), educational action research, peer tutor system

¹ Ethical clearance number: 2016-037

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Introduction

This paper reports on the process of implementing an educational action research (EAR; Altricher et al., 2000; Noffke & Somekh, 2009; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015) project focused on the establishment of an English academic support programme for preservice primary school teachers using peer tutors at a newly established rural university. The choice of focus emanated firstly from a recognition that many of the incoming students were entering university with English as a second or third language and were struggling with university-level studies conducted in English. We were acutely aware of the research that showed the struggles of second- or third-language speakers in making sense of their academic content (Nel, 2011; Nel et al., 2012). We also took cognisance of the general low level of academic language proficiency of first-year students (Elder & Paul, 2004; Grosser & Nel, 2013; Higher Education South Africa, 2009; Makura et al., 2011; Schoer et al., 2015), and how this impacts the development of graduate outcomes. Poor academic literacy is also associated with a high dropout rate (Cloete, 2016; van Wyk, 2014) or extended time to completion. Secondly, for student teachers, the consequences of not being able to master subject content knowledge (see Petersen, 2014) and not learning to teach in English competently (Petersen, 2014; Seligmann, 2008) are disastrous for improving educational outcomes in a country that already struggles (Hoadley, 2012).

The main claim of this paper is that a newly developed English academic support programme for preservice teachers needed to be implemented and assessed systematically, taking cognisance of what worked and what did not. Secondly, we were of the view that any programme that aims to develop skills like academic argumentation and the analysis and evaluation of a variety of texts would require disciplinary experts to work collaboratively to agree on, and foster such skills in different content subjects. In this project, the authors were interested in investigating the process of working with a student and staff community to design and implement an academic support programme for the improvement of students' English proficiency, taking heed of areas of challenge and tension to improve on the programme.

Review of the Literature

In South Africa, it is widely recognised that higher education students need proficiency in the language of instruction in order to progress academically (Pienaar, 2001; van Dyk, 2005). In most institutions, the language of instruction is English. Adequate academic proficiency provides "the link between students' entry into disciplinary communities and their acquisition of the formal conventions associated with the academy" (Leibowitz et al., 1997, p. 5) as well as other skills required for success in higher education (Kane, 2008; Nel & Nel, 2008). These include the ability to be able to communicate argumentatively (Grosser & Nel, 2013), to draw conclusions, and to critically evaluate opinions or other points of view (Halpern, 2007).

One of the biggest problems for higher education institutions, however, is that the South African high school system does not prepare all students equally well for tertiary studies. Taylor (2014, p. 17) contended that “little or no attention” is given to teaching reading in the school system, while van der Merwe (2018) showed that, in particular, the teaching of core academic language skills is neglected. Accordingly, students, particularly first-years, struggle to read and understand academic texts—and the underpreparedness of many restricts their epistemological access (Morrow, 1992). It also often results in failure or drop out with low academic language proficiency being cited as the major obstacle (Hay & Sebolai, 2007), particularly for students of colour (in South Africa, for black, Indian, and coloured students). For instance, there is a 40% rate of attrition with the 2006 cohort, of which African students had a dropout at one and a half times higher than white students (Council on Higher Education, 2013, p. 51). Numerous studies (Howie, 2007, in Grosser & Nel, 2013, p. 1) also pointed to the shortfalls in South African learners’ critical thinking skills and their ability to use the language of teaching and learning. For instance, Sebolai and Dzanzi (2015) found that students who perform poorly at university usually have “low levels” of academic literacy and/or struggle with English. This is similar for international undergraduate students (Garfield & Levi, 2004, p. 1). Bettinger et al. (2013, p. 107) were of the view that such “underprepared” students face more challenges at university and therefore need help to improve their academic success. Students who are academically proficient are able to read critically, know how to analyse structures of arguments, contextualise claims, provide reasons why they agree or disagree with authors, participate in academic conversations (Schleppegrell, 2009, p. 4), process information, and are able to differentiate between important and less important information (Weideman, 2014, p. iv). Finding ways to help students to improve their language skills is both essential and necessary at university.

One solution has been to offer students ongoing, targeted language support (Bettinger et al., 2013; Briguglio & Watson, 2014). There is ample research on how higher institutions scaffold students’ academic English proficiency (Huff & Sebolai, 2015) and enculturate them into the discourse of the academic community (Singh, 2017) through, for instance, language development courses (Bettinger et al., 2013, p. 103). Academic development support programmes also show promise. Studies at South African universities with disadvantaged students from resource-poor environments (Makura et al., 2011, p. 2) and who were considered under prepared (Archer, 2010; Brussow & Wilkinson, 2010), gained significantly from attending such programmes. Fouché (2015), for instance, showed that students improved in three dimensions between their pre- and post-test essays, namely, academic writing style, source material, and structure and development.

There are, however, reservations about the limits of such enrichment programmes. Fouché (2015, p. 25) found that students’ editing skills did not improve. Van der Merwe (2018), comparing the acquisition of core academic language skills of a cross section of teacher education students, concluded that support in Year 1 only had limited effects. And, in an extended degree programme, McKay (2016), who used a structured academic literacy module in the first year, showed that although the most disadvantaged students did benefit from the intervention, this did not translate into academic success in the long term. In that study, almost 42% of the students were either academically excluded or switched qualifications. McKay concluded that support beyond the first year was needed.

The research also outlined the challenges with refining programmes such as these for particular student cohorts and contexts (Darwin & Barahona, 2018; Huff & Sebolai, 2015). For one, the varying writing expectations across qualifications and degree programmes are compounding factors. In a study of one programme, Scholtz (2016) argued that different lecturers had varying writing expectations that directly impacted on students’ writing development. These also impacted how students articulated their knowledge through the duration of their degree, and were responsible for compromising student success over the longer term. Ultimately, academic support programmes

require all disciplinary specialists to contribute to the development of academic literacy and the commitment to core writing practices that will promote critical thinking and challenge students to think and reason (Tessema, 2011). This is however not so easy in practice. It requires rethinking at institutional level “about how to convince subject lecturers of the expanded instructional role they need to play in students’ literacy development” (Snow, 1997, p. 301; Snow, 2005; see also, Cenoz, 2015; Crandall, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper is cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) derived from sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) with its focus on semiotic mediation and the development of signs and symbols. In this study, we made use of Engeström’s (1987, 2001) version of CHAT as a lens to explore the process of using educational action research (EAR) to design and implement an English academic support programme using peer tutors. Engeström (2001) outlined the roles of the community, the division of labour, and the rules and conventions that impact on shared activity towards an object in an activity system. The activity system is portrayed in Figure 1. The *subject* in an activity system is the person or group whose actions are the object of study. The *object* is that which motivates the actions of the subject and upon which the action is lodged, using particular *tools/artefacts*, and resulting in a particular *outcome*. Such tools can be physical, and they can also be symbolic. The participants in an activity system are guided by both implicit and explicit *rules* in the community of which they are a part. The *division of labour* specifies who executes particular tasks and reflects the power differentials in the *community*. An activity theory perspective draws from an understanding that learning and teaching are culturally based social efforts. There is also focus on the communicative aspects of teaching and learning, where knowledge is shared and co-constructed (Hardman, 2008). CHAT stresses that in a system, communal activity inevitably leads to conflict and tension in order to generate change (Henning & de Beer, 2011). CHAT was useful as heuristic for viewing the various activities of role players and their interactions. Here, we were able to focus our attention on the interactions between students and tutors, between tutors and their lecturers, and between the academic support coordinator and others. We were also able to identify where shared activities led to discomfort and unease and created tensions that could either stimulate or inhibit progress and change.

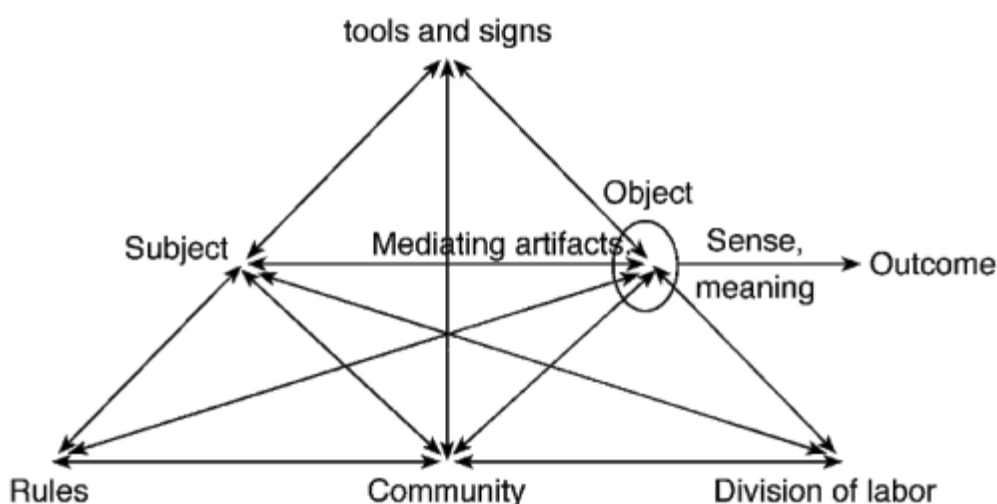


Figure 1: The Structure of a Human Activity System (Engeström, 1987, p. 78)

Using Educational Action Research to Design and Implement an English Academic Support Programme

This study intended to use collaborative methods in the design and implementation of an educational action research (EAR) project over the period 2015 to 2018. The project team, led by the first author, aimed at using methods that prefaced “collaboration,” “incorporation of local knowledge,” and “diversity” in an “emergent process” of “linking scientific understanding to social action” (Greenwood et al., 1993, pp. 178–180). The second author, as academic support coordinator appointed with international donor funding, was tasked with leading the conceptualisation and implementation of an academic support programme using peer tutors. As researchers, we were keen to adopt a self-reflective process of “inquiry directly linked to action, influenced by understanding of history, culture, and local context, embedded in social relationships” (Baum et al., 2006, p. 854).

We understand the purpose of action research is to enable action, reflection, and learning in successive cycles, and we aimed to do so primarily with the full participation of the people who were also the object of the action. In other words, the participants, namely, the students, tutors, and academic staff were both subject and object of action simultaneously. And, in keeping with the centrality of reflection in the various cycles, this requires reflexivity by the different partners, during which data is gathered and analysed and a new course of action is decided on. The action that results is then, in turn, subjected to further cycles of research and reflection. Educational change through participation, reflection, and action within specific contexts is the ultimate goal of this type of research (McGarvey, 2007; Prior, 2017; Fernie & Smith, in Stringer, 2008, p. 97).

In many educational settings, action research has traditionally been used to bring about change and social transformation. In professional contexts with teachers, it has enabled critical reflection on practice (Prior, 2017) and transformation of practice to incorporate new ideas of learners and teachers’ assumptions about education (Cranton, 1996). It has also been used by teacher educators for self-study (Loughran & Russell, 2002), by student teachers investigating their curriculum in practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005), as part of lesson studies, and to build a scholarship of teaching (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006). We deemed EAR to be most suitable for an inquiry that required collaboration between participants in tracking change in a higher education programme (Greenwood, et al., 1993, p. 178).

The following methods of data collection were used in different combinations in each cycle: questionnaires, observations, structured interviews, document analysis, video-recordings, and the personal research journal of the second author. Participants included up to 100 first-year students every year over a four-year period (2015–2018) who participated in the academic support programme, the peer tutors ($n = 181$) employed during this period, and academic teaching staff ($n = 9$) in the primary school teacher education programme.

Data were analysed during each cycle, using procedures associated with grounded theory content analysis (Charmaz, 2011) to identify areas requiring attention and improvement and where challenges and tensions were emerging (Engeström, 1987). Working in this cyclical manner enabled the authors to reflect on the results of the project implementation and to plan new actions in the subsequent cycles. Using a CHAT lens to examine the full set of data over a four-year period enabled the identification of overarching tensions (Willocks et al., 2018). The team submitted an application to the ethics committee at the first author’s institution. Particular care was taken to promote voluntary participation and to obtain informed consent from all research participants and, keeping in mind the multi-stage nature of the project, we regularly checked with participants if they were still willing to be

involved. Part of conducting an ethical study was also assuring participants of confidentiality when reporting on the results.

Cycle 1 (February 2015–October 2015): Getting Started

In preparation for the design of the academic language programme, the second author visited a number of metropolitan universities to get first-hand experience of existing English academic support programmes and tutor systems. Together with exemplar guides (i.e., “Language for Science” and “Mastering Academic and Professional Skills”) and other texts (Henning et al., 2005; Seligmann, 2013) from the first author’s institution, she designed an initial language support programme for implementation at a newly established rural university. Timelines were short because the first-year academic programme had already started and it was not possible to design the course fully and consult extensively before implementation. The programme was thus designed as it was implemented (see Herr & Anderson, 2005), and focused primarily on the areas academic teaching staff identified for attention such as plagiarism, summarising, paraphrasing, referencing, and general academic writing conventions. The peer tutor programme was developed and implemented at the same time. Senior students who met particular criteria (e.g., attaining a 70% aggregate) were recruited through an open application and interview process. Once appointed, they had initial basic training that included conduct when working with student peers, and preparation for tutorials—with the expectation that academic lecturers would provide subject-specific additional training. In this cycle, data were generated that focused on the usefulness of the academic English programme and the student and tutor experiences of the programme activities.

Reflections on Cycle 1, and New Action Plans

Student feedback about the value of the support programme was positive. They reported that it assisted them with improving “fluency and comprehension,” “in the construction of better sentences,” and “assisted with grammar and use of verbs.” However, based on student feedback and observation of tutor sessions, it was clear that some activities such as the paired reading and creative writing exercises were unsuitable. Students complained about the use of fairy tales and generic newspaper articles as the basis of exercises in tutorials. They felt that it was not aiding them in the development of the academic discourse practices of their teacher education programme. On reflection, the second author came to the realisation that while she was aiming for “the holistic development of students, it was misguided.” She noted the following in her notes: “I was using my own white cultural lenses in choosing fairy tales familiar to me, without understanding that it meant very little to young, rural African students.” These were then replaced with texts used in academic modules as suggested by Seligmann (2008, p. III; 1998, p. 5).

However, staff involvement in the design of the academic language programme and in the support of tutors was limited. For the former, it was restricted to indicating areas of student struggle and providing text materials from their academic courses. The enormity of the task of building and implementing both the academic English and tutor programmes at the same time were becoming too much for the second author, henceforth, practitioner researcher (PR). In discussion with the academic liaison between the university and the donor, the PR was advised to employ a tutor coordinator. Together with the other authors, the PR also began to explore strategies to drive more student autonomy and tutor accountability.

Cycle 2 (February 2016—October 2016): Building on the Emerging Learnings

The PR, after consulting with the other authors, designed an academic activity folder to give structure to the exercises and to enable students to self-judge progress. The folder also provided structure for the PR's presentations to students, followed by a series of themes for tutors to focus on for targeted intervention. Leading on from the success of Cycle 1, aspects such as grammar and extended vocabulary, including the identification and use of linking and signally words in argumentative writing, were strengthened. Further practical examples for students to improve on their academic writing were also included. However, more than one data source pointed to the dominance of a transmission mode of the student and tutor engagements and signalled the inadequacy of the initial tutor training. For instance, Duduzile, one of the tutors, indicated her struggles in this respect: "When you have to get people to participate that is the worst." The appointment of the tutor coordinator however brought much needed structure to the system as is evidenced in the following remarks:

When I was doing my second year . . . many tutors never show up for our tutoring classes and what I notice that this year tutors they are dedicated and full of energy, and we can all enjoy the class.

There is an improvement. Last year and previous year, some of the tutors would just come to class, lecture, then after class they promise emails, slides, maybe 2 days, 3 days, then they will send on the 4th day . . . now they send directly.

The PR's struggles to get the academic staff involved continued, with most holding views similar to that expressed by one lecturer: "It is not my job, it is the job of Mrs X [the PR] to do this work." Her struggles were similar to those experienced by the first author. As an experienced researcher from a neighbouring university who had led the implementation of the teacher education programmes at both institutions and was expected to conduct staff development, she offered to work with the rural university on a shared research project to build capacity. Despite her overtures to the head of the academic department (HOD) to plan for staff engagement in the project, she was unsuccessful in getting the buy-in of the HOD and thus unable to work with staff. Not wanting to derail the establishment of the academic support programme or the tutor programme she stepped back and worked solely through the PR.

During this period, the first of two donor-appointed evaluations took place and the appropriate sections of the evaluator report were considered. These confirmed the value of the English academic development programme and the growing effectiveness of the peer tutor support system:

The figures provide an illustration of the difference that mediation can make to the readability of different types of academic course materials used by second-language speakers. It is difficult to think of a better illustration of the need to continue the language programme along with the work of lecturers and peer tutors in improving the English academic proficiency of the students if they are to become independent readers. (Schollar, 2016, p. 54)

Reflections on Cycle 2, and New Action Plans

The need for more student-centred pedagogies in the tutor sessions and the incorporation of more subject-specific training for tutors were the catalysts for staff involvement. Two volunteered. The appointment of a tutor coordinator also enabled greater accountability, control, and coordination, with the added benefit of identifying at-risk students for lecturers. For instance, one tutor reported: "We're better prepared for tutorials and keep more accurate records of student attendance for follow-up with the lecturer." More communication with lecturers was enabled and became the start

of more collaboration. The PR's observation notes prompted a revision of the length of the academic articles for student activities to allow tutoring to focus on the development of targeted skills. The independent audit report served as external validation of the work and the value of the improvements in the first two years, which helped generate greater staff interest in the project.

Cycles 3 and 4 (February 2017—October 2018): Moving Towards Programme Maturity

In Cycles 3 and 4, activities were beginning to stabilise. The PR was also gaining confidence in running both the academic English programme and overseeing the peer tutor system. There was greater collaboration with academic staff. The majority of staff identified student exemplars of plagiarism and incoherent argumentation to drive the learning activities during tutorials. This was well received by students and the tutors. Staff also expressed their appreciation of efforts of the PR and the tutors and the value of the programmes:

Students are participating in the programme and I also see it in the students' results. (Dr A)

Without a tutor programme, lecturers would have to try and solve challenges that they do not always have enough time for. (Dr E)

The value of the tutor programme was also evident in the report from the independent evaluator: "The academic staff is supportive of the researcher who evidently and visibly has a positive relationship with her tutors and students."

As the peer tutor system began maturing, tutors started designing their own PowerPoint slides under the supervision of the tutor coordinator and the PR. Student developmental needs obtained through surveys were beginning to drive activities and included reading strategies, dealing with examination and motivational stress, and constructing an examination study timetable. These were integrated with the focus of the academic English programme and not only increased students' attendance but also their involvement and attention to developing other skills. The tutor programme itself was also generating much interest with more students expressing the desire to become tutors.

Reflections on Cycles 3 and 4, and New Action Plans

The growing confidence of the PR and the maturation of the English language support activities had a positive effect on the programme and staff's acceptance of its importance. The stabilisation of the tutor programme under the direction of a tutor coordinator freed-up the PR to focus on bedding down the activities that were working well and concentrating on elements still requiring attention. The main issue was the involvement of staff. By this point, many had made significant progress with their own academic studies. The involvement of two senior academics was useful in convincing other academic staff of the value of the tutor programme. In particular, the assistance of tutors in working with at-risk students and helping to consolidate learnings from lectures seemed to ameliorate the vestiges of staff reservations—they could see how the tutor programme was of benefit to them and to their students.

By this time, the first HOD had departed and another senior academic, who actively supported the work of the PR and the peer tutor programme, had taken on the academic leadership role. His developmental stance with the staff and his cooperation with the academic department led by the first author enabled more sharing between the institutions, including workshops at the first author's institution. Like the PR, after two years of successfully managing the academic programme of teacher education, staff were developing confidence in their academic roles and this seems to have encouraged a sense of agency and an openness to embracing the full range of tasks expected of them, including supervising and developing their subject-specific tutors.

A Retrospective Forward-Looking Stance

EAR is understood to be aimed at improving learning, teaching, curriculum, and administration in educational settings (see Zuber-Skerrit, 2015). It is particularly appropriate for improving student learning in preservice teacher education settings (Altricher et al., 2000; Noffke & Somekh, 2009) where, in a process of shared discovery, participants operate in collaboration to build useable knowledge (Snow et al., 2005). In the case of this study, the team began with the intention that collaboration would be a starting point for any decision-making and implementation. However, when looking over the various cycles and studying the data in situ, we realised that in Cycles 1 and 2, the implementation activities associated with the student support programmes were largely driven by the second author with minimal input from other stakeholders. This was due to a number of factors best understood through the heuristic of CHAT.

In the activity system of higher education, competing tensions were evident in many nodes. At the beginning of the project, the academic teaching staff were very new to a higher education teaching environment, in some cases, having come to academia from jobs as district education officials and schoolteachers. The academic staff, although supportive of the programmes, were unfamiliar with their place in the academic community with its mediating artefacts, rules, and the division of labour. They simply did not understand how to operate as teacher educators working in collaboration with others to create support systems for students. Their primary focus was on coming to terms with their academic and administrative responsibilities. Also, none of them had any experience of university-level tutor programmes. It was thus a natural reaction to devolve this responsibility to the PR. The HOD too, was constrained by her lack of academic leadership experience. As a middle manager in a new academic entity, she had no real idea of how to create rules to guide engagement and a division of labour in the community she headed. She could thus not provide academic leadership for the project, or guide staff collaboration.

The research component of the project was even less collaborative. Despite numerous attempts by the second author to get buy-in from the HOD, and to get the staff involved in the project, this was met with little success. The HOD was inexperienced in educational research and a scholarship of teaching and learning and remained unconvinced of its value for academic staff. She did not thus enable access to staff for training or for their involvement. From an insider perspective, the staff, taking their lead from the HOD, largely ignored the programmes and the research, and attempts to involve academics did not yield much success at the beginning. It would seem that the HOD took on a role of knowledge gatekeeping (Politis, 2002) by stymieing the creation of conditions in which knowledge development within the department could be enabled. In the process, opportunities for staff to build academic trust and to share knowledge in a developmental process were lost (Castiglione, 2006). Once a new HOD was in place, who understood and supported the work of the PR and the tutors, there was more cooperation and endorsement of the tutor programme.

A second factor impacting the research was the demands of staff's own postgraduate studies. With the exception of two, all were engaged in either master's or doctoral studies and were reluctant to take on other research activities. In the language of CHAT, the object of their research activities was not the academic language support programme or tutor development—it was their individual research foci. Reflecting on this at the end of Cycles 1 and 2, we recognised that it was unfair to have asked for more involvement from staff—we, perhaps, did not clearly understand the full demands on academic staff. In addition, the researchers should have made a greater effort to help them to contribute without adding to their workloads or to emerging tensions. This was, however, not easy to achieve and it was only by Cycle 3 that there was evidence of some shifts in achieving more participation and collaboration.

These tensions were also evident in the peer tutor programme. Peer tutoring facilitates the development of supportive and helping relationships (Jawitz, 2009, p. 613) comprising a horizontal component (same-level tutoring) and a vertical component (from lecturers to tutors). A tutor system in an academic context can only succeed if academic lecturers support such a programme (Button et al., 1990, p. 119). Our analysis reveals that at the beginning, the lecturers seemingly bought into the idea of a tutor programme—they listened, participated in a question-and-answer session on the programme, then agreed that it was a good idea and pledged their support. While some held weekly information sessions with their tutors and offered some initial guidance, this was where their engagement largely stopped. There was little further development of their subject-specific guidance to tutors and almost no investment in helping to establish the tutor system. Once again, the confusion about the division of labour and rules in the community seemed to have tripped up efforts at collaboration, which can only be described as weak and fragmented. It is possible that tensions arose because the lecturers were unable to link how the object of the activity system would influence the modules they taught. They did not see the link between the development of skills in the academic support programme and their own modules. This is not uncommon in higher education (see, for example, Tessema, 2011). The input of the PR in Cycle 2—using mediating artefacts from different disciplinary modules as the basis of student and tutor activities—seems to have brought about more lecturer involvement. Following this with the use of student-specific writing texts, sourced via the academic staff as practical examples for activities on plagiarism and incoherent writing, eased the tensions in the activity system and generated more collaboration. By Cycles 3 and 4, the division of labour and the rules governing activities in an academic environment were crystallising and more staff began to get involved.

Perhaps the area of most significant growth was for the authors and in particular for the PR. As a newcomer to higher education, the PR's own unfamiliarity with the rules and division of labour in an academic community led to her neglecting student, tutor, and staff input to the content of the English academic proficiency (language) programme in the first two cycles. Her insecurity about her expertise and position in the new institution led to her searching for structure first, and then inviting feedback. She, like many other PRs, had read extensively on how to conduct an educational action research project with others but its implementation was more complex (Robinson et al., 2018). A consequence hereof was the unsuitability of the first set of texts she chose, which did not reflect the life worlds of the students. These early tensions between the students and their engagement with the mediating artefacts—the texts—(Mok, 2006) prompted reflexive praxis on the part of the PR. Once she addressed the tensions by using students' academic texts and examples of their own writing artefacts as resources in the support programme, it led to a change in students' attention and participation in the tutorial sessions. The other authors, although experienced at educational action research, and in a leadership role in supervising the project, were also to blame; they were not proactive enough in highlighting potential pitfalls to the PR. From Cycle 2, there was a sense of real collaboration and cooperation from the students. Despite these successes, the tutors themselves took up to the end of Cycle 3 to develop the kind of accountability that was expected. In a similar way as the academic staff, tutors too were initially unsure of their roles and responsibilities. Without any student experts or old-timers (Lave & Wenger, 1998) in the community of practice (CoP) to show them the way, the rules of the activity system were unclear. In addition, given the PR's inexperience in managing such a programme, it is unsurprising that the collaboration of tutors and academic staff in the initial cycles was minimal. Cycles 3 and 4, viewed through the lens of CHAT, shows greater movement of all stakeholders towards a shared object. This was due to a number of factors. First, staff's growing understanding of the value of the tutor programme for strengthening students' academic proficiency was beginning to become evident in their course passes. The identification of at-risk students by tutors also allowed for targeted follow-up by lecturers. Third, the shared workshops at the first author's institution helped consolidate staff's learning to operate as teacher educators.

These areas of growth were also evident in the area of research. As the literature (Rauch et al., 2014, p. vi) reminds us, action research is participatory, situation-based, about improvement, useful in actual problem solving, and expects participants to learn from the experience (Koshy, 2015). What this research and the theoretical lens of CHAT has shown the authors is that it takes time, and many mistakes, to overcome assumptions about a shared object, the legitimacy of mediating tools, how the division of labour should be organised, and what the most effective rules comprise in a higher education community. As McNiff (2002) pointed out, in action research, constant dialogue was required with others in the community in order to bring about new knowledge that contributes to the process of learning and development. In the context of this research, the cyclical nature of the EAR process enabled a reflection on specific issues in order to make “informed decisions,” change, and improved “educational practice” (Koshy, 2015, p. 8).

Conclusion

This EAR project at a newly established rural university aimed at a collaborative and participatory process of designing and implementing a peer tutoring system for developing and supporting students’ academic English. With data generated over a four-year period, the findings reveal how tensions in one cycle gave rise to reflection and new action in subsequent ones. While we aimed at working collaboratively with multiple role players in order to develop student support programmes, competing tensions between various nodes of the activity system initially delayed the process of shared learning and knowledge production. However, the tensions also promoted growth and development, particularly for the practitioner researcher who learned how to leverage a shared object in the activity system to encourage more collaboration. In turn, this led to a lessening of areas of tension and greater dialogue which EAR scholars remind us is needed to bring about lasting change and improved educational practices. There is great value in this type of collaborative work. However, we would recommend that researchers learn from our mistakes and spend additional time exploring participants’ understandings of their role, place, and needs in such projects *before* moving to action. In complex academic environments, time spent on negotiating rules and division of labour in a community is well spent in order to minimise the kinds of tensions that arose in this project.

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