Expanding Utility of Activity Theory – from understanding to action: the ‘Hinge’ as an outcome from exploration of VET & Social Capital

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Abstract:
Coupled to the Engestrom (1999) foreseeing that acting upon third generation activity theory will require the development of conceptual tools, and cognisant of the Boundary Crossing Laboratory initiative (Engestrom 2001), this paper addresses an approach to expand activity theory informed conversations. Such conversations being directed at enriching research data and increasing the propensity for stakeholders to act upon research outcomes – adding value to researching. Whilst this is an account of generic approach, there is particular relevance to the activity of engaging with vocational education and training in the pursuit of strengthened social capital outcomes and, through this, productivity and enhanced social cohesion outcomes.

With value adding in mind, the author has found Activity Theory (more fully addressed as Cultural Historical activity Theory (CHAT)) to be highly generative in prompting research respondent and other stakeholder conversations. In this respect, the logic of an activity system representation of the issues adds to stakeholder capability in articulating their views and, accordingly, engaging others in conversation in such a way as to prepare the ground for acting upon research outcomes.

Arising from 2002–2005 exploration of the relationship between lifelong learning and organisational achievement, an approach has evolved of hinging interacting activity systems along the axis of “tool”, “object” and one of “rule”, “community” or “division-of-labour” (Hughes 2007, pp. 238-239). Subsequently, along with other applications, the utility of this approach has been further revealed in the 2010-2013 exploration by Lewis and Libby Hughes (2011, 20012, 2013) of the manner in which vocational education and training (VET) when well taught adds to social capital. And across this spectrum of research, there is strong resonance with the Svendsen and Svendsen (2004) suggesting that overlooking social capital matters is a missing link in the quest for productivity.

In essence, the proposition is that constructing-a-hinge conversation between stakeholders leads to a mutually agreed core object which serves as a coupling component between what may initially be seen as competing activity systems. Also, there are informing nuances which emerge from selecting which of the ‘rules’, ‘community’ or ‘division of labour’ is most pivotal in acting upon the core object - noting that this doesn’t prejudice the mediating integrity within each of the interacting activity systems.

Introduction – Conversation, Cohesion and Action:

Whilst it is the experience of earlier research which is the grounding for this paper, it is the opportunities inherent in further VET and Social capital research which prompts this sharing. In the course of research into the relationship between lifelong learning and organisation achievement (Hughes 2007) it became apparent that the device of an activity system is a very helpful conversation starter, and sustainer, with respect to gaining insight. This is especially regarding the stakeholder intersection of respective ‘object’ interests and the environment from which this arises; and then moving from research to action. Consequently, initiating conversation has been drawn upon in circumstances where I have sought insight into potential cooperations between actors where contradiction/tension, between interests, are prone to exist. In particular, the joint research by Libby1 and me into the manner in which vocational education and training (VET) when well taught adds to social capital (Hughes & Hughes 2011, 2012, 2013) has been characterised by

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1 Libby passed away on 7th February 2015 and, in large part, this paper is an overview of an aspect of this joint research which we intended to pursue – now a sole journey of exploration.
contradiction/tension between teachers with educationalist motivations and a system which appears intent upon eroding the “E” in VET. Erosion of the “E” occurring notwithstanding its contribution to social capital and productivity strengthening.

Contrary to trend, we have held that education – although entwined with training - is different to training. It is the “E” in VET which particularly adds to the social capital attributes of VET graduates (Hughes & Hughes 2011, 2012, 2013); and this has connection to the Svendsen and Svendsen (2004) view that valuing social capital is a missing link in the quest for productivity. Accordingly, we posit that a VET graduate having pride in-self, really wanting to draw upon what they know and can do, and purposefully adding to social cohesion in the workplace and beyond are significant attributes in contributing to both community and economic productivity.

Whilst it is the relationship between VET when well taught and productivity which leads to this sharing of the prospect of ‘hinged’ activity systems expanding the utility of Activity Theory, there are other circumstances where empathy and cohesion between stakeholders (actors) is the action glue. Therefore, this paper also addresses generic conversation activity of constructing the hinge.

With generic application in mind – although drawing from VET & Social Capital exploration - this paper is focused upon ‘conversation’ more so than social capital, but there is linkage.

Beyond yielding researched insight conversation between actors, with seemingly different goals, can lead to understanding and empathy for respective positions and seeking accommodation - each of the other. For example, there is the prospect that the activity (See Figure 1.) of conversation between teachers with varying nuances of motivation and practice (Hughes & Hughes 2013) can lead to cohesion between them whilst yielding, strengthening of VET, valuable insights.

In turn, hinged derived insights have value in seeking-cohesion between educationally committed teachers and their employing VET providers where organisational sustainability and/or profit is the employer goal. This being with compliance in mind; and within a system appearing not to value ‘educationalist’ input. Accordingly, the employer may be a third ‘hinging’ party at the Figure 1 table.

As an illustration of expanded ‘hinged’ approach to recovering from eroding the “E” in VET, Figure 2 is a helicopter view of multiple interacting activity systems. In this instance, hinging conversation being directed at restoring the valuing of “E” as would apply in knowingly adding to the social capital attributes of graduates. In essence, there is the potential for the VET system to

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2 An educationalist VET teacher being one who goes beyond just attention to knowledge and skill; and, thereby, nurtures social capital attributes such as pride-in-self, being a lifelong learner, contributing to social cohesion, trustworthy, etc. Whereas, the non-educationalist VET teacher - as viewed by Lewis and Libby Hughes (2011, 2012, 2013) - has a much narrower focus upon knowledge and skill outcomes from VET where attention to attitude, and the like, are excluded.
purposefully pursue entwining social capital and human capital outcomes with community and economic productivity gain; and hinged-conversation is a generator of action in this regard.

At the outset, it should be noted that this paper is grounded in experience – albeit largely in the course of research - more so than research finding. Accordingly, researching confirmed utility of ‘hinged’ activity systems (see Figure 4b) is a work-in-progress.

Research approach leading to the notion of ‘hinged’ activity systems:

The instances of research, from which there is now an extrapolation leading to the proposition that there is utility in hinged interacting activity systems (see Figure 4b), have been ethnographic. With conversation regarding agreed (finding synergy) core object and view of the environment within and between stakeholders being at the hinge. The accruing insights have been viewed through the prism of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) – hence the interest in enhancing the utility of Activity Theory. This said, it should be noted that the ‘hinge’ proposition has not been the focus of the research; however, it is an experienced outcome meriting sharing and further investigation.

These research instances of awakening to the ‘hinge’ proposition began in 2002 in the environments of the Country Fire Authority of Victoria (CFA), water industry, waste management and contract cleaning; and yielded the LCM Model 3 for organisational achievement through drawing upon the outcomes of lifelong learning (Hughes 2007). In November 2003, with an orientation to drawing upon what volunteer firefighters know and can do leading to strengthened community safety, the model was published in The Australian Journal of Emergency Management (Hughes & Henry 2003). And in 2005, whilst having been implicit for some time, the model’s utility was confirmed as a tool in activity systems where organisational achievement is grounded in drawing upon the outcomes of lifelong learning (Hughes 2007).

In the period 2008 to the present day, the broad efficacy of the model (now referred to as the LCM Achievement Model) has been explored largely in the context of the contribution to society

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3 The model – now known as the LCM Achievement Model - melds attention to valuing outcomes from lifelong learning, with valuing nurturing a supportive culture and valuing relevant motivations. Achievement of the organisation’s goal – the sweet spot – being pursued in accord with the intersection of these ‘valuings.’
of vocational education and training (VET)\(^4\); and with prominence to its activity system application as an enabling tool – probably, as a component of broader enabling artifacts. Aligned to this, in recent years, a joint researching interest of Libby and Lewis Hughes has been the relationship between VET when well taught adding to social capital (see Hughes & Hughes 2011, 2012, 2013).

It was in the course of VET and Social Capital research that an iconic emailed thank-you remark from a respondent occurred – “You’ve got as all talking”. Whereas, hitherto I was drawing upon the research informing value of conversation and had employed the ‘hinge’ device as demonstrated in Hughes (2007, Figure 10.3, p. 239) it was not in mind to research the force of conversation. However, this remark got Libby and me thinking and intent upon formal exploration. On reflection, in these instances, both bridging social capital and positive bonding\(^5\) social capital (Putnam2000) were strengthened by conversation.

**The Activity System framework for conversation:**

With the focus upon linking respondent participation in organisational achievement research to action, I acknowledge partial similarity with the Change\(^6\) Laboratory approach (Virkkunen, Maikinen & Lintula 2010, Virkunen & Newham 2013). Indeed, in addition to other strengthening of activity theory in action, this ‘hinging’ offering may have ‘Change Laboratory’ application in circumstances where the quest is for agreed object and environmental empathy - leading to action. In this respect, the five principles of activity theory (Engestrom 2001) – (1) activity system as the prime unit of analysis; (2) multi-voicedness; (3) historicity; (4) contradictions/tensions informing change and development; and (5) potential for expansive transformation – are much in mind. This prompts conversation leading to construction of hinged activity systems which yield insights and motivations leading to action. Action being arrived at through a process of giving voice to multiple stakeholders in a manner which adds to cohesion and reveals contradictions/tensions prompting and informing change.

On the matter of movement from learning to action, I suggest that there is merit in taking a next step from the Engestrom (2001) five questions – Who are learning? Why do they learn? What do they learn? - to exploring Who are acting? Why do they act? What do they act upon? and How do they act? By this mechanism, there is overt and deliberate connection, via learning, to action – being the raison d’etre of the ‘hinge’\(^7\).

Whilst my formal researching of linkage between ‘hinged’ activity systems prompted conversation and propensity for this to generate action has not yet occurred, experience does ground this as a reasonable initiative and worthy of application. In advocating such application, Figure 3 illustrates the approach which I have taken to drawing upon activity theory for research and/or facilitating conversation; and having in mind probable resonance with Change Laboratory approaches as developed by Engestrom and colleagues (Engestrom 2001, Virkunen & Newham 2004).

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\(^4\) An example being Hughes (2010). Interestingly, the Canadian Vocational Association, March 2013, Pick of the Month.

\(^5\) As bonding, within a group, may lead to either good or bad outcomes with respect to wider community cohesion, ‘positive bonding’ is referred to so as to indicate contributing to the community-good end of the spectrum – e.g., strengthening the bond within the group so as to be more effective in empathetic bridging to others.

\(^6\) Noting that the term “Change Laboratory” appears to be an evolution (maybe a contraction) from the earlier “Boundary Crossing” as used in Engestrom (2001).

\(^7\) Learning is, of itself, an activity and is a pathway to action.
With strength and unity of activity in mind, Figure 3 illustrates the utility of –

1. having clarity within and between parties as to the objective of the activity – i.e. the goal valued by all with some as active pursuers; and, possibly, some as beneficiaries not necessarily yet acting in an overt manner. This is “The Why”;
2. regarding ‘subject’ and ‘object’ as “The What” of the activity – i.e. actor(s) and their relationship to the activity. ‘Object’ and ‘Objective’ being entwined and at the core of conversation leading to construction of the ‘hinge’ (see Fig. 4.b) – indeed, unraveling the meaning difference between ‘object’ and ‘objective’ adds to the utility of the conversation;
3. regarding ‘rules’, ‘community’ and ‘division of labour’ as significant components of “The Environment” in which activity is occurring and/or may occur; and
4. actors in the activity valuing and embracing the tool (broadly defined) – i.e. “The How”

In operation, the Figure 3 approach to facilitating conversation can begin at any point as appropriate to the purpose - with the system displaying context. However, in general terms, the experience has been to begin with the ‘Why’ and the ‘What’ as framing the purpose of conversation. Moving then to facilitating conversation about perceptions of the environment is an opportunity for finding common ground whilst also making explicit differences in perception leading to empathy (not necessarily universal agreement) as a basis for drawing upon a tool - to be devised or existing.

The above said, I acknowledge that there are many pathways to conversation. However, in circumstances of linking lifelong learning to organisational achievement, I have found that the activity system representation does have high utility as a conversation initiating and guiding framework. In particular, the environment component of ‘rules’, ‘community’ and ‘division of labour’ is more expansive in potential reach than the three elements might indicate.

Instances of informing and motivating conversation

The Hughes and Hughes (2011, 2012, 2013) exploration of VET and Social Capital is the catalyst for further inquiry. However, the activities giving rise to this sharing are the conversations arising in the

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Whereas, hitherto, I had thought of rules as being aiding and inhibiting influences, reflecting upon conversations now causes me to think of rules more in terms of shaping activity.

Note: In this paper I have referred to ‘tool’ rather than ‘artifact’ for simplicity purposes. However, in conversation, discussion about the potential breadth of Tool/Artifact(s) meaning is helpful and widens the mind to possibilities.
course of researching the relationship between lifelong learning and organisational achievement and the subsequent exploring the broad efficacy of the LCM Achievement Model\(^{10}\).

The following are examples of researching activity relevant to sharing the notion of ‘hinged’ activity systems.

- In the course of exploring retaining Country Fire Authority of Victoria (CFA) volunteers (Hughes 2007), a junior volunteer shared that she felt inadequacy because she (still at school) didn’t bring life experience to the brigade. However, adult members of the brigade immediately reassured her that this was not so – her computer literacy being one example and her, leading by example, enthusiasm for learning being another. There was a sense (action outcome) of newly awakened older volunteer empathy for the self-doubt that junior volunteers may feel and some reassessment of what they, as an adult, bring to the brigade and what they might contribute to others in the brigade – adding to the sense of family.

In this instance of CFA brigade members sharing thoughts on valuing lifelong learning, the conversation included adult volunteers with motivations different to junior volunteers, brigade leaders with brigade functioning and sustainability focus, and CFA corporate officers with an organisational view. In an activity system context, there were multiple interacting systems arising from difference in ‘subject’ and, potentially, different nuances of the volunteer retention ‘object’ as linked to the community safety ‘objective’. At the time, the CFA was initiating (not universally welcomed by long-term volunteers) more formal training, than previously the case, across its volunteer base. This was consequent upon the loss of a volunteer crew to wild fire.

- In addition to the CFA, exploration was also conducted within water management, contract cleaning and waste management sectors. Across this spectrum, the logic that conversation potentially builds empathy which may not otherwise exist and fuels useful action was evident. In the case of waste management and contract cleaning, joint meetings with competing private and public training providers, where profit was the objective on one side and sustainability on the other, there was sharing of strategies for learning-partnership based workplace delivery of training. This sharing included the consequences for their respective students and employer clients. There was a sense that research informing conversations were adding to empathy between parties with competing goals and demonstrated willingness to act in drawing upon a newly available resource\(^{11}\).

- In the instances of VET and Social Capital research, much of the conversations were interview in character; however, on reflection, they were informing of how interacting activity systems might be group conversation ‘hinge’ constructed.

Where group conversations occurred, these were with like-minded people; and the sharing was largely from the comparative perspective of provider management and teacher delivery. Whilst the social capital objective was shared, the aiding and inhibiting nuances were different and had influence upon arriving at synergy with respect to shared object. Airing of these positions gave an opportunity for re-establishment of empathy - it was this that gave rise, to the feedback “You’ve got us all talking”. However, there was subsequent

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\(^{10}\) See footnote 3 for an explanation of the LCM Achievement Model; and refer to Hughes and Hughes (2012, pages 19 – 22) for a VET and Social Capital illustration of the model in use.

\(^{11}\) Workplace Training Support Kit developed by Property Services Training Australia (Industry Training Advisory Board) with Australian National Training Authority funding.
(but not consequent) reduction in staff numbers and reassignment; and this has caused me to revisit the importance of personal security, empowerment and motivation in respect of contributing to change. Logically, where being responsive to the *unexpected and newly challenging* is sought, personal security, empowerment and motivation are necessary inclusions in the environment. Accordingly, sharing of personal security, motivation and empowerment matters have a significant place in the ‘hinging’ conversation. With this in mind, I offer the ‘Hinge’ approach for consideration.

**Review of the ‘Hinge’ approach to generating conversation leading to action**

With the foregoing as background, Figure 4 is a comparison between the conventional portraying of 3rd Generation Activity Theory (Engestrom 1999) and the hinging of activity systems. It should be noted that it is the process of conversation leading to constructing the hinge which is suggested as expanding the utility of activity theory; and beckons further investigation. It is suggested that there are three dimensions to this utility expansion – i.e.

- the cohesion between actors which can occur when co-operatively engaged in sharing conversation in pursuit of a common goal – seeking synergy between respective motivations and action;
- the increased propensity of research respondents to contribute to and/or act upon research findings where there is a sense of ownership – resonating with action research and, potentially, hinging conversation being a component of such; and
- the triangulation opportunities which arise from data/insight accrued through hinging conversation and comparison with insight accruing from other sources – including drawing from the prism of non-hinged activity systems.

![Figure 4a – Conventional portraying of 3rd generation Interacting activity systems (Engestrom 1999)](image)

![Figure 4b – ‘Hinged’ interacting activity systems (Hughes 2007, p. 239)](image)

![Figure 4 – Comparison of conventional to hinged interacting activity systems](image)
In overview, the construction of hinged activity systems is a device to generate bridging and/or positive bonding conversation leading to, and supporting, action. In essence, having so directly contributed to framing and contributing, a research respondent has a sense of ownership and is more inclined, than would otherwise be the case, to contribute and/or act upon the outcomes of the research. This strengthening of utility arises from three particular question foci for the conversation.

1. What is the mutually valued objective giving rise to the shared object?
2. Where is common ground for the object – problem, opportunity, or other point at issue? – i.e. Where is the synergy between the, respectively, differently nuanced objects as may be the point of focus?
3. Which of ‘rules’, ‘community’ or ‘division of labour’ is pivotal to addressing the object and hence contributing to the objective? Note: What is revealed, via the conversation, on this point is more important than the decision. As the integrity of the integrated activity systems is not affected by this placement at the pivot point, it is the bridging/bonding conversation (of itself) and the outcomes from conversation which have ‘acting’ value.

In addition to the hinge-informing questions strengthening utility of activity theory, in the instance of the quest being to develop a tool¹² appropriate to the interacting (‘hinged’) activity systems, the ownership by respondents and collegiate stakeholders is increased. The reason for including ‘collegiate stakeholders’ is that experience indicates that there is potentially an ownership flow-on effect to colleagues who have not themselves participated in forming the hinge. There is broader, than immediately involved, mutuality in contributing to the objective.

In pursuit of the objective, as illustrated in Figure 4b, the interacting systems are abutted to form a ‘hinge’ along an axis of conversation comprising ‘tool’, ‘object’ and one of ‘rule’, ‘community’ or ‘division of labour’. The mechanism of constructing the hinge being, firstly, sharing of views regarding differences and commonality in respect of the ‘object’. Secondly, which of ‘rules’, ‘community’ or ‘division of labour’ is the major influence in attending to the object (noting that the value is in the conversation more so than the choice). Thirdly, sharing views upon the form and nature of the ‘tool’ – as presently, or may, exist. At each of the three points, the conversation yields insight and understanding for the researcher and the respondents; and the conversation builds empathy between respondents adding to the propensity for them to act upon research outcomes.

I reiterate that whilst the coupled power of conversation to yield researched insight and to support change has been evident throughout the wider research giving rise to the ‘hinge’ approach, it is especially the social cohesion and productivity aspect of the VET and Social Capital exploration which motivates now offering the ‘hinge’ proposition for consideration. The ‘hinge’ proposition being that there is value-adding to research gained by conversation informing abutting interacting activity systems in the manner of a ‘tool’, ‘object’ and selected base ‘pivot point ‘as illustrated in Figure 4b.

The journey – quest for community and economic productivity

Whilst continuing exploration of the ‘hinge’ as a device for prompting and supporting conversation is reaching beyond VET and Social Capital, such application abides as an informing source - as

¹² Circumstances may exist where the tool is a given and the quest is to draw upon the tool. In such circumstances, having grounds for mutually valued ownership is also important and achievable through ‘hinge’ orientated conversation.
foreshadowed in the extracts of conversation which follow. In particular, experience and exploration thus far gives cause to pursue the following –

Hypothesis: **Notwithstanding instances of resistance, within the Australian VET system, to going beyond attention to just knowledge and skill, there is more than recognised nurturing of social capital attributes within graduates. And, further, there is community and economic productivity gain in overtly – through making explicit conversation - acknowledging this.**

The motivation for pursuing this hypothesis is that VET in Australia could be at a turning point in addressing the concerns of quality committed providers that there is, seemingly, systemic tolerance of shallow VET delivery\(^\text{13}\). Evidence of recovery includes inadequate providers being now called to account and withdrawal of suspect qualifications. Under these circumstances, it is opportune to generate conversation which applauds and is confirming that, beyond attention to knowledge and skill, the goal of VET is to entwine building human capital with social capital strengthening; and, thus, underpin community and economic productivity - now and into the future.

The above said, and indicative of what is to be gained by expanded VET system conversation, during March and April 2012 the following online conversation occurred\(^\text{14}\).

In response to the question - **"Is VET a desired contribution to building social capital?"**

**Note:** These interlocutors (respondents) are not representative of diversity of view regarding valuing of the "E" – they are broadly within the category of ‘pro VET attention to social capital’. Deliberate soliciting of ‘against VET attention to social capital’ is called for in gaining fuller advantage from ‘hinge’ utilisation. Also, initiating debate regarding the entwining of ‘objective’ and ‘object’ – in the quest for shared object synergy – has much merit, but is not present in what follows.

**Interlocutor 1** – VET professional body executive:  
*The question is do we all understand what this concept of social capital is? I believe that the full potential of Australia’s VET system is not recognised either within the system or from outside the system. The E (education) component is a critical element of the facilitated learning process and it is through this process of facilitated learning that capabilities of Australia’s critical asset – its people – are enhanced for everyone’s’ benefit.*

**Interlocutor 2** – VET manager and practitioner:  
*… in Australia presently and more particularly in Victoria the VET sector is being used as a cash cow where the credibility and quality is being auctioned off to as many bidders as can sign a form to become registered and RTO [Registered Training Provider]. There is hope that this ridiculous situation turns around before there is a complete destruction of the sector.*

**Interlocutor 3** - VET consultant:  
*… Let’s not confuse education with academic teaching*.

**Interlocutor 4** – VET consultant and freelance practitioner:  
*There are various parts to this discussion perhaps it would be beneficial to commence with definitions. It has been raised at recent conferences that E (education) and all that surround education has multiple definitions particularly in the changing*

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\(^\text{13}\) There is a view that the increase in VET provider numbers, coupled with encouragement of increased competition (contestability) has caused a ‘race-to-the-bottom’ as providers seek to attract students based upon ease of completion more than quality of learning.

\(^\text{14}\) Some of these interlocutors coupled teaching (VET practitioner) with their primarily management or consulting roles (VET professional). Accordingly, in a ‘hinged’ sense, this conversation reflects a sharing of management view more so than a teaching view; however, ‘hinging’ is appropriate as these are individual views and with varying nuances of stakeholding.
Understanding of the relationship between E (education) and social capital is advantageous... As a starting point, perhaps collaboration may assist to reach some sort of agreed definition of the term ‘education’.

Interlocutor 5 – Lewis Hughes, researcher: Responding to clarifying the perceived coupling of what might be meant by education and social capital - “... It is our [Libby and Lewis Hughes] experience – thus far – that a first reaction is “What’s social capital?”; and then upon explanation (as we see it) there is an appearance of an overt awakening to an issue which has been previously tacitly in mind. Our experience, thus far is that giving what some regard as soft outcomes from VET the name ‘Social Capital’ elevates its importance and generates conversation.”

Interlocutor 6 – teacher/trainer/ assessor: “I will be honest and I went and looked up ‘social capital’ to refresh my memory. Found an intriguing site that helped me” [URL given]

Interlocutor 7 – VET quality assurance manager and practitioner for a private provider: It is my belief that the building of social capital by and within the VET sector is implicit rather than explicit – It’s embedded within the very fabric of what we do as educators. However, I am not sure that the majority of us are aware of the role we play in building it. ...... Where learner confidence, self-belief and personal success is nurtured and supported, social capital is created. .... In conclusion, my answer to your question is Yes, there is a role in VET strengthening social capital – not a new role or one that needs to be introduced. It’s already happening and I believe the sector’s level of contribution currently is very high, albeit an implicit and already thoroughly embedded role. My questions back to you are – does it need to be more explicit? What would be the benefits? How would this be done?

With reference to Figure 3, cognisant that online making-a-difference conversations may become common place, and with the benefit of hindsight, I could have been more active in expanding the conversation using the device of agreeing the pivot point of the hinge. For example, interlocutor 1’s opening comments – “All understanding” can be viewed as a rule; and this invites the question of Who are the all?; leading to consideration of scope of community; from this, consideration of division of labour follows. Also, the remark “within the system or from outside the system” has relevance to division of labour; and “its people” has relevance to scope of community. In ‘hinge’ constructing conversation, making such connections is a prelude to the question – “So which of rules, community, or division of labour has pivotal influence?” – noting that it is the ensuring conversation, more so than the definitive answer, which adds to insight, empathy and cooperative activity.

Importantly, this snapshot of VET and Social Capital conversation is indicative of the potential for gain by VET system-wide engagement in such conversation. The conversation being a pathway to securing valuing of the “E” in VET and overtly embedding VET attention to social capital as a component of learning.

And, beyond VET and Social Capital, there is reason to further explore the utility of activity theory via drawing upon a ‘hinged’ approach to generating conversation. This is especially the case where the increased propensity for take-up of research outcomes is sought and/or cohesion between otherwise conflicting parties has merit. Also, hinging, may have particular utility where there are many parties to the activity; and having them at a common table is advantageous.

In conclusion, at this time, I reiterate that exploration of the ‘hinge’ is a work-in-progress; and my sharing is an account of what has been (and intended as continuing) useful to me, and Libby, and I trust of interest to others.

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15 In Australia there are public providers (frequently identified as Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Institutes; and there are also private providers operating as for-profit or not-for-profit entities. In this instance, the interlocutor is a senior staff member of a for-profit provider which requires its teachers to be ‘educationalist’ in character.
About the author
From a background of mathematics and science teaching and then diverse enterprise management and consultancy, Dr Lewis Hughes is the Director of Enviro-sys – a consultancy focused upon broadly defined sustainability through making the best use of knowledge. Consequently, his research interest is largely directed at issues associated with lifelong learning and the yield to the individual, community and organisation. Lewis is a Life Member of the Australian Institute of Training and Development and, also, an Honorary Fellow of Deakin University, Australia.

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