



## Activism – A Category for Theorizing Learning

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Recent issues of my local, bi-weekly newspaper reported that the students of an elementary and middle school in my municipality had planted trees along Tod Creek, a small stream in the scenic Gowlland/Tod Provincial Park that empties into Tod Inlet, itself an integral part of Saanich Inlet (Figure 1). The trees, planted along the shores of the creek on its less-protected upper reaches, provide shade that improves trout habitat and stabilizes the riparian areas. Upon seeing these articles, my mind is flooded with memories of different studies my research group has conducted, all of which pertain to the topic of this special issue: activism. Thus, over 12 years ago, I had begun a program of learning science through activism in that school, which took children out into their community learning about a local creek, advocating publicly for its clean-up, and teaching others in the community about this special aspect of their local watershed and its role in human and environmental health (e.g., Roth & Barton, 2004). This applied research project, extending over more than two years, allowed me to understand how activism constitutes a context for learning not only (about) science but learning for life. Subsequent to the work with several teachers of the middle school, other teachers, too, took their students out into the community to contribute to the betterment of the environment.



Figure 1. The WSÁNEC people have been inhabited Saanich Peninsula (right) and Saanich Inlet for hundreds of years; Tod Inlet is one part of Saanich Inlet.

Tod Inlet was also the focus of several other studies.<sup>1</sup> The WSÁNEĆ peoples, the First Peoples of this area, considered this to be a special, sacred place and called it in

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their SENĆOŦEN language SNITÇEĒ, “Place of the blue Grouse” (SISB, Elliot, & Guilar, 2008). SNITÇEĒ is the site where the WSÁNEĆ had a winter village. It was a place for gathering food: clams, crabs, herring, cod, and salmon were plentiful here. Along the shores, there was eelgrass (*Zostera marina*), a flowering plant that lives in the sea. Its long green leaves offer very rich and productive habitats, which, in turn, provide for the food resources that the First Peoples were drawing on. Tod Inlet is part of the beautiful Saanich Inlet (Figure 1), which has been the home to the WSÁNEĆ peoples for hundreds of years. They continue to inhabit this pristine place, as three villages (reservations) are located along the shores of the inlet (visible on the right in the photograph).

With the coming of the settlers came long-lasting environmental impacts that all but destroyed this place. In the latter part of the 19th century, a limestone factory (operating until 1915) and a plant manufacturing tiles and flowerpots (operating until the 1950s) impacted the entire inlet. Quarrying destroyed the eelgrass beds and the dust from the factory and plant came to cover the area. There was a settlement for the workers and their families, which, too, impacted the environment.



Figure 2. Nature is reclaiming the old industrial site and associated village.

Today, nature is claiming back some of what had been taken: The photo in Figure 2 shows how plant life is beginning to grow in and around the concrete housing.

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(Eindhoven University of Technology), and Giuliano Reis (University of Ottawa) assisted in this research in various ways and at various levels. A detailed analysis of the cultural history of Tod Inlet can be found in van Eijck and Roth, in press.

Another part of the area, including the quarries, is reclaimed by Butchart Gardens, a world renowned tourist venue attracting around 1 million people per year.



Figure 3. An environmentalist group not only reestablished eelgrass in Tod Inlet, but also informs visitors through information panels and a visitors' information center. Pumpty-Dumpty, the boat to the left of the center, is used to empty effluents from the pleasure boats that use the inlet.

But nature does not do the recovery (healing) on its own. Local activists from the SeaChange Marine Conservation Society, participants in three of my laboratory's research projects, have begun to replant areas with eelgrass that had all but gone from Tod Inlet. They are aware both of the threats to eelgrass meadows – by industrial, residential, and recreational activities that produce pollution and anchor dragging – and of the potential for recovery that comes with this important plant to a sustainable environment. They not only share this awareness by operating a small exhibit (Figure 3) but also assist in the operation of a small boat “Pumpty-Dumpty” – visible in Figure 3 on the left – that is used to pump the effluents from the holding tanks of and collect garbage from the recreational boats that anchor in the inlet (Figure 4). However, heavy usage of the area by boaters continues to threaten this place, and there are several activist groups – including the Saanich Inlet Protection Society, SeaChange Marine Conservation Society, and Peninsula Stream Society – that work on improving the environmental health of the area. But the threats continue. Not long ago, in its June 17, 2009 issue, the *Peninsula News Review* reported:

Once scenic and serene, pristine Tod Inlet is now a dumping ground for derelict and abandoned boats

More than one rotting, rusty vessel can be seen by millions of tourists strolling through Butchart Gardens' Japanese garden. The “flotilla” as it's

referred to by locals, includes many sinking and decaying boats, garbage and pollution of all kinds. (Lavin, 2009, p. A1)  
The article also features semi-submerged rusting boats and part of a rusting crane mounted onto a barge. How do we bring places such as Tod Inlet back so that it represents again the spirit of SNITZEE?



Figure 4. Activism turns Tod Inlet into a favorite for walkers and pleasure boaters alike, who benefit from but also constitute a threat to the environment. The posts are remnants of the dock in the factory's harbor.

This, then, is the setting of the elementary and middle students' actions, which constitute not just another school task but a contribution to changing our environment for the better. These students do not just produce more paper to be dumped as soon as they have received their grade, but they contribute to the environmental health, which, in turn, contributes to the human health in the area – which, as a provincial park, has become a tranquil site for leisurely walks that take visitors along about 1.5 km from the road to the former factory. The children do more than just contributing something, they do participate in a societally motivated activity, in the relation to which their actions obtain their sense. They realize *common* rather than partial interests. This is a contribution to activism not in an abstract manner, such as contributing to the David Suzuki Society, the World Wild Life Fund, or some other organization. It is local action that has a concrete impact on the lives of their fellow people in this municipality and the visitors to this area.

My work among school students engaging in activism in another creek of this municipality and among different activists groups (that all worked together with the local First Nation) I have come to understand activism as a context for learning

science. Today, however, I feel this is not enough. In this article, I propose activism not as just another context in which students can learn science but as a category in a theoretical framework on the basis of which we understand learning. In the remainder of the article, I articulate such a theory, which extends the one Marxist psychologists – including Lev S. Vygotsky and Alexei N. Leont’ev – have established largely during the first part of the 20th century.

### **From a Theory of Activity to Activism**

The philosophers merely interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it. (Marx/Engels, 1978, p. 535, my translation)

Although Lev Vygotsky and Alexei Leont’ev are frequently quoted in Western scholarship, the fundamental Marxist grounding of these Russian psychologists tends to be omitted and, with it, the basic assumptions about knowing and learning underlying their work that have their roots in Marxist philosophy. The quote introducing this section, which constitutes the eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, is often used to make a point for emancipatory learning, which is about transforming where and how we live rather than merely understanding life. But the other dimension addressed in this quote, the epistemological one, tends to be forgotten. Thus, labor, which transforms nature, precedes consciousness; the latter is the consequence of labor rather than its antecedent (Marx/Engels, 1968). Hominids – much like chimpanzees – have produced tools and transformed the world long before they began to think in ways typical for human beings today. Consciousness develops out of and accompanies labor. But working not only changes the world, the object of labor, it changes the subject of labor as well. On the most immediate level, doing work expends energy, which human bodies produce by changing the body; and mind is equally affected by such transformations. Thus, the point is both to change the world and to change the human subjects that inhabit it.

This, therefore, is a double determination of activism: a context and theory of learning. First, activism changes the world we inhabit; and participation in activism *is* learning rather than merely leading to learning. Moreover, it is not only the individual who is transformed but, because of the constitutive relation of individual and collective in Marxist materialist dialectics, society is transformed as well. We should not take the fact that such changes do not stand out like a red flag as evidence that it does not occur: my research in fish hatcheries allowed me to understand that even the most routine and tedious jobs that appear to be the same day in and day out actually lead to lasting learning that is evident from the changes in the actions of people that occur at longer time scales. Thus, in this article I propose *activism* as the basic category for theorizing learning. In the following sections, I articulate and develop, as much as the limited space allows, the category of activism, consciousness as the ideal moment of activity, and subjectification and personality as two developmental dimensions.

### *From Activity (Tätigkeit/deyatel’nost’) to Activism as Basic Category*

In the dialectical materialist approach, (productive) *activity* is the minimal unit for making sense of phenomena. It is the central category, therefore, both in the

cultural-historical analysis of the development of economy (Marx/Engels, 1968) and in the development of the human psyche (Leontjew, 1982). Importantly, activity means not just being busy, doing some task; rather it means contributing to the production and transformation of society broadly. This distinction is central in the languages where the theory was developed, but the English language creates us with a theoretical problem, as it translates two very distinct German/Russian terms, *Tätigkeit/deyatel'nost'* and *Aktivität/aktivnost'* into the same word activity. Moreover, Leont'ev himself uses the term *deyatel'nost'* (*Tätigkeit*) to refer to events related to school-like learning, which has little to do with productive activity. In schools, much of what children and older students produce in formal learning environments ends up in the garbage can (unless some eager parent collects a piece as memorable item pinned to the refrigerator or gathered in a portfolio). The avoid the problematic application of the category activity to situations that are not – the things students tend to do in school science – I propose using *activism* as the central category of a new learning theory that borrows from and transforms those Leont'ev concepts useful to the theory proposed here. Thus, in some but not all instances where I use the term “activism,” readers would have found “activity (*Tätigkeit/deyatel'nost'*)” in my earlier writing.

The central purpose of *Tätigkeit* is material production, which transforms a given set of materials into some product that meets some need in/of society. Tailors produce clothing, farmers produce grain, and bakers produce bread. These products used to be exchanged for other products, but – other than in some special circumstances – are exchanged today using money as a mediating device. The different forms of (environmental) activism chose Tod Creek, Tod Inlet, Saanich Inlet, or some other aspect of the environment as their object with the motive of transforming it to increase the regional environmental health. The activists, in this way, contribute to a common, universal need, for it is increasingly recognized that environmental health is closely connected to human health. They act according to *common* rather than partial interests, interests that embody material transformations rather than merely fulfilling epistemic needs direct toward controlling/understanding others. When students participate in and contribute to activism, they contribute to the common good rather than produce some laboratory report that ends up in the rubbish once the science unit is completed. Importantly, each form of activism is characterized by an object/motive – creek and its transformation; participating in activism therefore has a *motive*, which organizes *emotion* and *motivation*, two affective aspects in learning that other learning theories need to import from the outside, but which are present on the inside of learning in the current approach. There is no need to motivate participants – to do something they do not want to do on their own – motivation arises from the motive. So does emotion, which is a reflection/refraction of the current state of the activity in its relation to the anticipated end and an evaluation of the levels of certainty about being able to achieve this end.

Activism is realized by concrete actions, which are organized by and oriented to goals that the subjects of activity – e.g., each group of activists, each member of a group – consciously set. For example, in the context of our research, the SeaChange Marine Conservation Society has had as one of its goal the mapping of all eelgrass

meadows on the east coast of Vancouver Island; another goal it set was the replanting and reestablishment of eelgrass in Tod Inlet. It is evident, therefore, that there is a mutually constitutive relation binding activism and action. The former exists only in as far as it is concretely realized by means of actions, but the latter are only executed in view of the latter. In fact, each goal-directed action takes its sense from the fact that it realizes a particular form of activism. The same action would have a different sense in a different form of activism. The action of driving a boat in Tod Inlet has a very different sense for the boaters seen in Figure 4 (i.e., meeting their pleasure needs) than it has for the captain of Pumpty-Dumpty (Figure 3), who realizes a goal of the environmental activists. The children's actions of planting trees has a very different sense when it occurs in the context of a tree farm than it has in the context of Tod Creek, where they contribute to the expansion of trout habitat and to the environmental health of the region.

Actions themselves are composed of conditioned operations. Thus, for example, the captain of Pumpty-Dumpty has the conscious goal of collecting effluents, but navigates the boat is something she no longer has to consciously orient to. The children realize their goal of planting trees (action), but, if they are familiar with using a spate, they do not have to consciously think about pushing a spate into the ground (an operation). It should be evident that actions and operations, too, stand in a mutually constitutive relation. The children push the spate into the ground *because* they intend to plant a tree, but the operations of pushing the spate into the ground and placing a tree into the gap created concretely realize the action of planting a tree.

Important to the idea of activism as a basic category is that actions and operations cannot be understood independently of it. That is, even the development of routine, unconscious operations – like how to use a spate – is tied to the motive of activity, which gives sense to the goal of planting trees, which, in turn, calls for using the feet for pushing spates into the soil. This theory therefore goes against the idea of teaching simple operations and skills before allowing someone to engage in the more complex actions and activities.

Fundamental to production is that is oriented to and involves consumption, distribution, and exchange. It is not that participants just do something: they do something in view of outcomes that affect others outside activism. Therefore, activism embodies and implies outcomes that are of benefit to the environment and society, so that, as in any other *Tätigkeit* there are processes of exchange, distribution, and consumption. The activism related to Tod Creek and Tod Inlet are not for activists themselves, they are to produce a healthy environment that allows locals and tourists to go for leisurely walks, kayak, or spend a night with their sail/motor boats. Production not only produces a new state, a new good, but constitutes a form of consumption, where tools and human bodies come to be changed by wear or use of energy. But human bodies not only undergo wear, they also become better or more efficient of doing certain things. That is, by engaging in activism, human beings change and *learn*.

*Consciousness, Learning, Ethics*

A second form of learning derives from the change in *consciousness*, a major category for both Marx/Engels and Leont'ev. Consciousness is the *ideal* dimension that accompanies *material* production; it is a psychic reflection of reality. That is, the category of activism always implies two irreducible dimensions: the material and the ideal. To the material objects that are to be transformed correspond the ideal motive and goal that exist in consciousness. Because activism transforms the world and the material subject, it also transforms consciousness.

Consciousness literally means knowing (Lat. *sciēre*) together with (Lat. *con-*). That is, knowing *never* is something in an individual head; it is always already shared with others. This is so because the ideal, thoughts, are tightly linked to words, which embody a generalized reflection of reality (Vygotsky, 1986). Language therefore constitutes “practical consciousness-for-others and, consequently, consciousness-for-myself” (p. 256) and its transformation is tied to the transformation of consciousness. However, “[t]he word is a thing in our consciousness, as Ludwig Feuerbach put it, that is absolutely impossible for one person, but that becomes a reality for two” (p. 256). As the children participating in activism change the way in which they talk (about) tree planting, environmental health, or personal health, their environmental consciousness changes, too. Children learn. With the children’s learning, society learns and transforms. Here we return to the quote that opens this section: the point of activism is to change the world, not only to make it a better place to live but also to change consciousness. Participating in activism means changing consciousness, not only on the part of the children and students who contribute to it but also, as a result of their work, of the community as a whole.

The category of consciousness also leads us to understand that individual and collective are irreducible to one another: they stand in a constitutive relation. A collective is not just a collection of individual minds constructing knowledge about the world and others. Rather, a collective has to be thought as a singular plural (Nancy, 1996). As such, the collective is a singular constituted by a plurality of members; the collective therefore also is a plurality. Similarly, each member *is a* singular, but it can be understood only through its membership in a plurality. A member is a plural singular. This has serious consequences. First, taking even one person out of a group changes the group; adding one person to a group equally changes the group – its culture, knowledge, practices. It is not that there is just one less or one more body. Because individuals concretely realize consciousness, the forms of consciousness available in and to any one group change as soon as its composition changes. Second, what matters is *consciousness*, knowing together with others, rather than individual prowess. Any individual is constitutive of the whole, and, therefore, constitutive of others as well. This leads us to an ethical relation – what I do affects us all, what any other individual does affects me, too. Thus, any action of a child that improves environmental health not only changes the child but also the community; and any action of a polluter – such as the farms that my children have discovered to increase fecal coliform counts in another creek to unsustainable levels – affect them and the community as a whole. Equally, when the children find out about pollution and publish their results at an open-house event organized by environmentalist groups, then they contribute to a change in collective



consciousness. Not only the children learn in and through activism, the community as a whole learns. Thus, *activism* not only constitutes the context and a material process, it also denotes a *form of consciousness*. This is a very common experience that participants within activist group share: theirs is a very different form of consciousness than the one characterizing most politicians, economists, and consumers.

### *Becoming a Subject, Developing Personality*

The category of activism allows us to think about the person in ways that differ from the going ways, captured in the concept of identity (literally self-sameness, from Lat. *idem*). This concept highlights individualism, individual Self, and individual agency. As a subject of activism, the person does not exist outside of its relation to the activism. That is, we cannot think the person as *individual*, as if it were an entity that could be thought on its own. Who we are, can be, and can become is a function of the activism as a whole, for *it* constitutes the *minimal* unit of analysis and the minimal unit that makes sense. We cannot think activism – as this is generally done in educational research – by taking the subject together with tool, object/motive, division of labor, community, and rules as elements to compose the whole. The subject is nothing unless it is the subject of a specific activism, the tool is nothing unless it is the tool of a specific activism, and so on. Who and what the subject is, therefore, can be understood only by thinking it from its constitutive relations within and to a specific, concrete activism. Thus, for example, one article of the *Peninsula News Review* features a picture of Kasey Ingham, a fourth-grade student, who helps plant alder trees along some creek on the Saanich Peninsula. We cannot talk about him in general. As participant in some form of activism, he is constituted as a particular subject precisely of *this* activism. As soon as he returns to his family or when he goes to play on a peewee hockey team, the subject tagged “Kasey Ingham” has to be thought differently, even though some aspects might *look* the same. But, as the early results of an on-going research project of mine show, following a person across different *Tätigkeiten* exhibits very different subjects and subjectivities. The person (personality) arises from the way in which these different subjectivities are cobbled together.

The approach presented here offers two concepts for thinking the subject: *subjectification* and *personality*. Within a particular *Tätigkeit*/activism, the subject changes together with the whole and the relations that it mediates. That is, there is a historical process at work related to the moment “subject” of the *Tätigkeit*/activism. This historical process I denote by the term subjectification, which I understand as “the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience” (Rancière, 1999, p. 35). That is, subjectification is a process that changes the body of the person (subjectivity) it anchors, changes that come from acting and express themselves in changes of expressions that are associated with a change in the forms of experiences that can be made. Thus, “Kasey Ingham” is part of and undergoes a historical process that makes him part of the activism on Saanich Peninsula. He *becomes* (as) a subject of activism; and this process of becoming I denote by the term

subjectification. This term highlights that being a subject cannot be theorized solely by the term agency but requires a correlative concept of passivity, which accounts of our experience of being *subjected to* the relations within activism as much as being agential *subjects of* activism.

Individual persons do not just participate in one *Tätigkeit*/activism, but, as pointed out above, moves from one *Tätigkeit* to another repeatedly during the same day only to return the next day, week, or month. As a result of this movement, a historical process occurs in which motives (goals) come to be knot-worked into a hierarchical network. This historical I denote by the term personality. Personality, therefore, constitutes a hierarchical relation of *Tätigkeiten*: “These hierarchies of *Tätigkeiten* are produced by their own development; they also constitute the core of personality” (Leontjew, 1982, p. 178). Thus, personality is not the outcome of individual agency, because the hierarchies of *Tätigkeiten*/activisms are the outcomes of development that the individual is not in control of – they “are produced *by their own* development.” Leont’ev notes that “it is easy, by means of observation, to discover the first ‘knots’ that constitute the earliest stage of personality development in the child” (p. 178). My research among children participating in activism only confirms this constative. Thus, participating in tree planting shapes the personalities of the children, such as Kasey Ingham, some of whom will increase their levels of participation in different forms of activism. The category of activism, therefore, is incompatible with such concepts as “science agency,” “science identity,” and (causal) relations between the two.

In a particularly moving case study, I was able to show the double process of subjectification and personality while following a seventh-grader (Davie) labeled as “learning disabled” in his school (Roth & Barton, 2004). It turns out that in the traditionally taught mathematics lessons, I made observations consistent with the “LD” label that got pinned to Davie, and as a result of which he was continually being subjected to removal from his regular social context “to get his problem fixed.” On the other hand, he not only (a) contributed enormously to the collective understanding of the creek he studied, but he also (b) taught the teachers at his school how to do research in the creek, (c) simultaneously supervised two groups of peers in another class, and (d) taught adults and children alike during an open-house event that one environmental activist group had organized. The subject “Davie” I observed in the *Tätigkeit* of schooling was very different from the subject “Davie” I observed in the activism focusing on Hagan Creek and its watershed. The developmental possibilities of activism are very different from the processes of subjectification – focusing on disciplining and producing obedient bodies – that occur in the *Tätigkeit* of schooling. This is important because subjectification and personality stand in a mutually constitutive relation, as the processes of subjectification produce the materials for the “knots,” and processes of personality select among and hierarchize motives and, therefore, participation in particular *Tätigkeiten*/activisms. Importantly, therefore, the developmental possibilities at a larger scale, personality, appear much more attractive in the activism than in the mathematics class, which might well lead to drop out and a future of menial labor.

### **Activism: Toward an Ethic of Care**

Cultural-historical activity (*Tätigkeits*) theory was created to understand human life form, which inherently is a continuously changing form. Life implies change, and something that does not change inherently is dead (any living organism is characterized by exchange processes, and dead things, such as the Latin language, no longer change). Marx recognized that human beings are not merely subject to conditions – like animals and plants – but they *actively* orient to their environment and change it. Here I propose activism as the central category for learning, because it (a) no longer allows *Tätigkeit* (activity) to be conflated with *Aktivität* (activity) and (b) orients our learning theories toward processes that transform the world we live in. Consciousness is the ideal side of the material transformation of the world, and it, in activism, changes together with the material world including our bodies and their practices. I consider this article but the beginning of a historical process of rethinking the theory required for understanding learning in the context of transforming the world, where persons heretofore belittled as “children” and “seniors” contribute as much as adults of working age.

The advantage of activism over other theoretical categories is that learning can no longer be thought as something that individuals will do. The category orients us to the collective and to life as a whole. The individual is but a constitutive moment, obtaining both agential and passive dimensions that other theories currently do not consider. We are both *subject (subjected) to* and *subjects of* activity, and who we can become is as much a function of the specific activisms that we participate in, as it is a function of, the hierarchy among the different *Tätigkeiten/activism*s that constitute our lives.

There is important work to be done. One aspect never thought outside dialectical approaches is the fact that life continuously changes. Any theory concerned with change – life, learning, development – requires categories that capture the dynamics underlying change. In dialectical language philosophy, for example, this is achieved by having language change in the very act of using it – the sound-word uttered twice in a row no longer *means* to say the same (Bakhtine [Volochinov], 1977). The currently common concepts of scientific knowledge, conceptions, discourse, literacy, or identity denote states. They then require processes, themselves denoted by static terms, including learning, conceptual change, and development. They are associated with instruments that measure the values of these states, the particular knowledge, conception, IQ, trait anxiety, or self-efficacy that a person “has.” But the processes simply denote transitions between states; these do not capture the change *process*. The processes are outside agencies, like the film projector that moves the reel to make images appear to be animated. A category that is to capture a process inherently has to embody (contain) the change, where the different states are thought as limits, one-sided representations of the category as a whole. That is, the categories we require have to embody inner contradictions; they have to be heterogeneous. Marx/Engels use the category of *value*, the limit moments of which are *exchange-value* and *use-value*. The historical process of economic development arises from the fact that a commodity embodies this inner contradiction of being both exchange and use value. Similarly, Leont’ev introduced *deyate’nost’/Tätigkeit* for thinking consciousness and personality as processes, which required *deyate’nost’/Tätigkeit* to be a category that embodies inner contradictions in

diachronic (i.e., temporal) and synchronic dimensions (i.e., the irreducible nature of subject, object, tools, etc., which cannot be thought independent of all the other moments of *deyate'nost'/Tätigkeit*). In the same way, therefore the category *activism* embodies inner contradictions because it theorizes simultaneously the present materials and the anticipated product. Activism thinks the transformation of the world, and, with it, the transformation (learning) of the subject. It thinks about how to return some of the damaged places (e.g., Figure 2) into pristine but fragile places (e.g., Figure 1). And it embodies the contradiction that it improves upon the environment for the use by people (Figure 3), whose very presence threaten/endanger the environment (Figure 4).

If we had to express the essence of this theory in one sentence, we might well say this: *activism is learning*. There is no need to wonder whether and what to teach to get students to learn. Activism is learning, inherently, and the problem is to theorize any static concept, such as knowledge. Activism also means changing a world to make it a better place, and changing our social world to bring about better relations to our neighbors, at local, national, and global scales. In this way, the motto “act locally, think globally” takes on a whole new dimension. Local thoughts and actions are global thoughts and actions, and any global thought and action also is a local thought and action. Changing the environmental health of Tod Creek and Tod Inlet changes the health of the planet Earth, and any change somewhere else on the planet makes a different planet and therefore, a different Tod Creek and Inlet.

The First Peoples inhabiting this place (Figure 1) knew what I restate and theorize here. *SNITZEŁ* did not denote a place that one exploits and depletes to obtain food (SISB et al., 2008). *SNITZEŁ* is not just a name but, synecdochically, denotes a form of material life and consciousness. In addition to being a place where to find food and be nourished, *SNITZEŁ* designated a place to train warriors, to practice survival, transformation, fasting, and self-renewal; it was the entranceway to hunting grounds, to food aplenty. It also meant finding and *looking after* a tree. That is, the first peoples already engaged in activism, *looking after* trees and nature. *SNITZEŁ* therefore is not just a place name but it denotes a form of life that includes caring for and looking after the place you inhabit. Places like *SNITZEŁ* reflect the understanding that the *WSÁNEĆ* have of their relation to plants, food, their world, and life; it is a form of teaching. Each *SNITZEŁ* story is a story of transformation, which is a fundamental value of the *WSÁNEĆ*. Central to transformation is their language, which allows them to understand that they are part of a whole that exceeds any one of them, and that they are there to serve the whole (community, life).

*Activism* is offered here as the core category for re/thinking and re/theorizing learning and transformation, our ethical responsibility for our place on this earth, and the responsibility we have toward future generations. As a well-known quote from the First Peoples goes, “We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.” We are caretakers of the Earth so that we can return it to future generations. *Activism* embodies the spirit in which we can achieve this task. *Activism* constitutes a form of consciousness that we want society and its

future generation to develop; and it also names the kinds of contexts in which the learning occurs that produces such a form of consciousness.

### **Coda: A Word of Caution**

I end this article on a cautionary note designed to raise a potential problem that arises from type/token confusion when categories of analysis come to be used to name situations (the category “tree” is something very different from a specific instance of a tree). Activity (*Tätigkeits*) theorists have warned educators about the problems that arise when the term “activity” is used both to design specific learning contexts and to theorize these contexts. The danger lies in reifying concepts, seeing, for example, authentic learning because a situation was designed for authentic learning – even though a critical analysis reveals that no authentic learning has occurred. Similar problems have arisen when educators have used “legitimate peripheral participation” or “community of practice.” Here I propose the *activism* as a category of analysis despite being well aware of the dangers of type/token confusions. I consider the dangers to be of lesser extent than in the other cases because of the strong political stance that comes with the attempt to design for activism. Not any school science task will do. Even the elementary and middle school students mentioned at the beginning engaged in but a few environmentalist actions; they did not yet – in contrast to the students I had taught a decade earlier – enact activism as a continued context for contributing to and transforming society. It may have been all but another school task to get children interested in school. Even though activism *may* constitute a context, I am more interested in activism as an analytic category. Above all, because activism constitutes a form of consciousness, only situations that reproduce and transform this kind of consciousness will deserve the name.

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