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Restrictive practices influencing workplace-based experience implementation at TVET colleges

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ABSTRACT

In the National Certificate (Vocational) (NC(V)) qualification, work-integrated learning (WIL) is referred to as workplace-based experience (WBE), which is a key part of the vocational college curriculum. There are well-known barriers to WBE, such as poor connections between the college and industry and the lack of resources for its implementation. A more nascent concept in existing literature is the constraints to WBE emerging from restrictive practices at the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges themselves, which is the topic explored in this article. This article aims to address the question: What are the micro-level restrictive practices affecting WBE from TVET college lecturers' perspective? To do this, TVET college lecturers were interviewed about their understandings of WBE and perceived barriers to its implementation. Data were analysed by using cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) to examine the historical tensions between different components of the TVET college WBE activity system. Among other difficulties, the researchers identified tensions between the roles played by lecturers, WIL officers and college management as leading to restrictive practices. The research concludes that different professional groups should be encouraged to collaborate in order to share perspectives and co-develop new models for addressing the various WBE tensions at TVET colleges.

Keywords: Workplace-based experience (WBE), work-integrated learning (WIL), National Certificate (Vocational) (NC(V)), tourism, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), activity theory

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Introduction

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges in South Africa provide practical, vocational and occupational training to equip students with employability skills (DHET, 2013, p. 11). TVET colleges became more relevant in the education landscape through the introduction in 2007 of the National Certificate (Vocational) (NC(V)) in the TVET sector as an alternative to secondary schooling in order to meet the changing needs of workplaces (UMALUSI, 2013, p. 15). The NC(V) was meant to replace apprenticeships and occupationally focused programmes, for example the National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) occupational courses. The NC(V) is offered over three years, commencing with NC(V) Level 2 in 2007, NC(V) Level 3 in 2008 and NC(V) Level 4 in 2009. For the sake of context, NC(V) Level 4 is equivalent to a Grade 12 certificate, that is, a school-leaving certificate, but with specialised vocational skills. The standard entry requirement to enrol for NC(V) includes a Grade 9 pass or equivalent.

There are about 19 different NC(V) programmes (related to specialised fields) offered at TVET colleges. However, for the purpose of this article, the NC(V) tourism programme is the focus, as this is the area of expertise of the lead author. The theoretical content of the NC(V) programme consists of three fundamental subjects (English, Mathematics/ Mathematical Literacy and Life Orientation) and four vocational subjects specific to the discipline of tourism. Regardless of the programme, the theoretical content in the NC(V) curriculum is generally taught in terms of practical examples explained in class. Furthermore, curriculum documents suggest that this be accompanied by at least some sort of workplace exposure, for example job shadowing, excursions and workplace-based experience (WBE). WBE is a form of work-integrated learning (WIL) used at TVET colleges in South Africa. Even though WBE is not formally mandated by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), subsequent published policy statements have made it clear that it is an essential part of the curriculum, as the following excerpt from the White Paper indicates:

> Workplace training and work-integrated learning (WIL) must be a central part of our training system. This is an understanding that the DHET and other stakeholders (including employers, the labour movement and community organizations) are coming to share. It is demonstrated by the National Skills Accord, signed in July 2011 by all the partners in the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) (DHET, 2013, p. 16).

In a 2010 report by Papier (DHET, 2010, p. 32), it was stated that TVET colleges currently lack resources necessary to assist students in locating WBE experiences and that they have little motivation to do so because the NC(V) does not mandate it (DHET, 2010, p. 31). In essence, TVET college students should be granted access to the workplace and all signatories should, as agreed, promote expanded access to training opportunities in both educational institutions and workplaces (DHET, 2013, p. 8).

Notwithstanding the above, the problem in South Africa is that individual TVET colleges do not provide any WBE opportunities at all for their NC(V) tourism programme students. Research suggests that there has been a 'lack of WIL' for NC(V) programmes since 2010 (DHET, 2010; DHET, 2013; SSACI, 2013). The Swiss–South African Cooperation Initiative (SSACI) stated the following as regards the importance of WIL for TVET programmes:

> Work-integrated learning (WIL) should be a central component of the college programmes… . The extent to which students are able to get placements in the workplace will be used as an important indicator for assessing the performance of the management of institutions. The DHET will place a high priority on the colleges achieving regularly increasing levels of workplace placements for students and will expect colleges that have problems in this regard to seek assistance from both the Department and the SETAs [sector education and training authorities]. This will serve to ensure that work-integrated learning is taken very seriously (SSACI, 2013, p. 6).

For context, the SSACI, in cooperation with DHET, initiated a Swiss-funded Internal Continuous Assessment project in 2008 to structure WBE in such a way that it supported applicable NC(V) curricula. The project succeeded in ensuring that WBE contributed to the weighting of TVET college students' year mark, especially for the NC(V) tourism programme in 2014 and 2015 (Taylor, 2013). However, owing to the differing capacities of TVET colleges to place students in workplaces and to administer such placement, the project was terminated in 2016. Thereafter, WBE was no longer compulsory and it was up to the individual colleges to determine how they were going to introduce their students to the workplace. This stance is supported by research conducted by Taylor (2013) and Coetzee (2012), who found that, historically, TVET colleges have been poorly staffed and resourced and that lecturers have been minimally involved in WBE. Following the stoppage of the initiative, only a handful of TVET colleges continued with WBE; for the majority, the lack of an assessed, weighted component was one of the major issues limiting WBE.

Fundamentally, research suggests that TVET colleges face challenges that prevent them from providing much-needed WBE exposure for students, particularly in NC(V) programmes. In essence, these constraints most likely stem from macro- (e.g. funding, policy), meso- (e.g. college capacity and resources) and micro-level restrictive practices.

Although attention has been given to challenges at the macro and meso levels (e.g. Taylor, 2013), less attention has been paid to challenges at the micro level.

In this study, therefore, the primary research objective was to determine, through the lens of TVET college lecturers, the influence that restrictive practices at a micro level have on the implementation of WBE at selected TVET colleges in the NC(V) tourism programme.

The present article investigates how internal college relationships and divisions of labour restrict WBE, even when funding and other macro-level restrictions may have been dealt with. To better understand the data, a theory was required that viewed WBE as a system whose interacting parts may be in a state of tension with one another. One such theory is cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) and its analytical tool, the activity system. By employing CHAT as an analytical tool, the researchers were able to determine the tensions that were leading to the observed restrictions in the WBE system.

Ultimately, this article can assist TVET colleges to understand what their NC(V) staff value about WBE and where they see internal restrictive practices occurring in the WBE activity system.

The importance of lecturer involvement in WBE

Various literature sources comment on the benefits of WIL (Billett, 2003, 2009; Govender & Wait, 2017; Konkola, 2007; McRae, 2015) and state that the best way to learn is to engage in real-life processes of change. Furthermore, they point to the academic, personal, career and work ethic benefits of WIL. WIL seeks to draw on the social as well as the cognitive experience, where, according to Govender and Wait (2017, p. 52), students view WIL as the most significant influence on their future careers. According to Billett (2009, p. 837), there are strengths (e.g. access to real job activities, observation and listening to peers, real-world practice and access to more experienced co-workers) as well as limitations (e.g. lost class time and short duration of practical exposure) when it comes to WIL.

Govender and Wait (2017, pp. 51–52) are of the view that WIL benefits various stakeholders, as:

- Students generally contribute economically and socially during WIL by working hard and engaging in practical activities;
- Lecturers are able to evaluate real-world scenarios, thereby preparing students for the workforce and enhancing their abilities; and
- Students are given an opportunity to develop important skills and attributes that are necessary for the workplace (e.g. those relating to communication, interpersonal relationships, writing, technology, teamwork, leadership, observing theory in action, applying theory, workplace culture, meeting expectations and coping with our rapidly changing world), which may lead to significant personal growth for them.

Notwithstanding the above, Govender and Wait (2017, p. 50) state that there is limited empirical research as to what the benefits of WIL projects are. Although WIL is deemed significant for vocational students, its implementation at TVET colleges in South Africa is inconsistent. This view is supported by DHET (2010), which noted that WIL is to be observed much more in technical disciplines like plumbing than in business-oriented fields such as hospitality.

Taylor (2013) confirms this observation by indicating that TVET colleges are, for the most part, understaffed and underfunded, with little engagement on the part of lecturers and little industry participation in placements, thereby hampering effective WIL through WBE. Taylor also notes that the absence of a weighting for WBE in year marks reduces its significance for both students and colleges. In addition to the lack of weighting, lack of funding to support students during work experience is an often-cited reason for the poor implementation of WIL (Njengele et al., 2024). The latter is also commonly linked to the lack of involvement of industry in TVET college course design and pedagogy, thus creating a barrier to WIL implementation (Wedekind et al., 2024).

Molele et al. (2024) assert that there is inadequate management of WBE activities, beginning with the planning of WBE and then the placement of NC(V) students. They also posit that lecturers have no guidelines in terms of what their roles in WBE are. The study by these authors in the Limpopo province of South Africa highlighted that WIL officers operate independently, concentrating only on college-related activities and ignoring industry developments. This, Molele et al. (2024) state, negatively affects the placement of students. Additionally, Maseko (2018) highlights how crucial academic leadership is in effectively managing WIL and indicates that it takes dedication on the part of academics (including lecturers) and professional partners with a range of specialties to create effective WIL programmes. Molele et al. (2024) further state that, according to WIL officers, there are still gaps at the college level, which lead to problems with students' WIL placements.

According to Maseko (2018), even though there are clear institutional guidelines and resources for WIL, lecturers should be aware of new opportunities and enhance their teaching techniques based on newly emerging ideas. This, however, will be possible only if they are part of the WBE process. According to Paterson et al. (2017), implementation of WBE must be ensured by management, for the integration of WBE cannot be realised without efficient management. In a study undertaken by Ngubane et al. (2021), it was found that there is minimal enforcement by campus managers. Consequently, it is mainly the duty of the WBE champions to enforce integration and the responsibility of TVET management to ensure that all participants (including staff and students) understand the purpose of WBE.

Even where the above challenges are acknowledged to be an issue, much of the current focus on the improvement of quality in colleges has been on developing lecturer qualifications in pedagogy and on knowledge of the fields concerned (Rudman & Meiring, 2018). Other authors (e.g. Van der Bijl & Oosthuizen, 2019) have also commented on the lack of theoretical, disciplinary and workplace knowledge on the part of lecturers at TVET colleges as well as on their not having official teaching qualifications. This focus on lecturers' abilities may have led to a sense of inadequacy and even alienation among teaching staff (Wedekind, 2010). Furthermore, such sense of inadequacy may be made worse by lecturers having to contend with larger classes in larger college structures and widening discontinuity between the community and the classroom.

In advocating for quality teaching in the TVET sector, and in support of current lecturers' abilities, Rudman and Meiring (2018) argue that the focus should be on what lecturers do in their interactions with students rather than on development of qualifications. Wedekind and Russon (2024), like Rudman and Meiring (2018), suggest that lecturers should be more involved with organising WBE that supports their regular teaching roles. Though not explicitly stated, it may be inferred that this is because of lecturers' knowledge of the field of study and of their students. Improvements in quality should then involve the role of lecturers in improving engagement between colleges and industry.

Theoretical framework

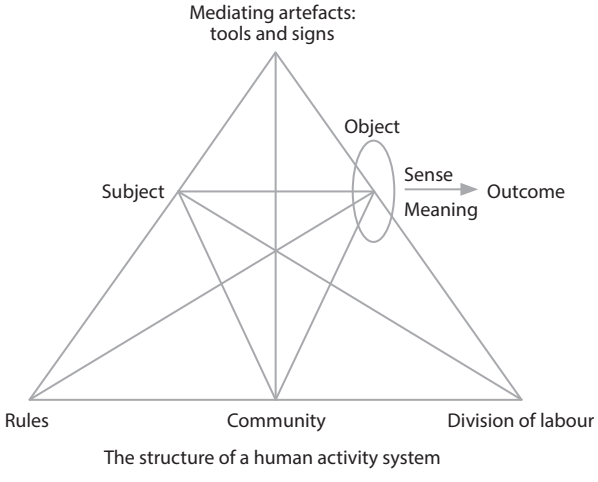
Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 2015), also known as 'activity theory', states that human thought and behaviour are connected in activity systems that are organised by groups and mediated by artefacts. Engeström (1999, 2001, p. 133) and Downes (2022, pp. 63–64) suggest five principles that can be used to summarise activity theory:

1. A collective, artefact-mediated and object-oriented activity system, seen in its network relations to other activity systems, is taken as the prime unit of analysis;
2. Multi-voicedness characterises activity systems, which exist as a community of multiple points of view, traditions and interests;
3. Historicity shapes activity systems, which get transformed and take shape over lengthy periods of time;
4. Contradictions play a central role as sources of change and development; and
5. Expansive transformations become possible in activity systems over a period of time.

With this foundation in place, CHAT, or activity theory, was identified as a suitable analytical tool. By employing an analytical lens, CHAT gives researchers a way to look into and understand what is happening in organisations. The theory makes it easier to study how people and groups change and grow by interacting with one another and through mediation. CHAT is an appropriate tool for this study because it can investigate how people interact and learn at both the micro and macro levels (Spinuzzi, 2023) and it will help to determine how people in a college's activity system understand and implement WBE.

The unit of analysis in activity theory is the activity system shown in Figure 1. In the top half of Figure 1, the trio of 'subject', 'object' and 'mediating artefact' is a frequent way of conveying the concept of cultural mediation of activities. The sub-triangle depicts the link between the tools (cultural and historical beliefs, artefacts, theories), the subject (which is driving the system) and the object/outcome (issue to be resolved) (Engeström, 2001, p. 134). This sub-triangle represents the first generation of activity theory, with a focus on individual learning (Engeström & Sannino, 2021).

Figure 1
Second-generation activity theory model



Source: Engeström (2015).

In second-generation activity theory, the social and collective parts of an activity system are added to the first-generation 'subject', 'mediating artefacts' and 'object' system (Engeström 2001; Engeström & Sannino, 2021). These are the community (i.e. who else is involved with work on the object), rules (overt rules, policies and hidden rules that subjects and other stakeholders comply with) and division of labour (i.e. who does what on what authority). In using second-generation activity theory, it is important to examine how the components interact with one another (Downes, 2022, p. 61).

In third-generation activity theory, there is recognition that a targeted activity system often interacts with and is influenced by other neighbouring activity systems. Thus, the unit of analysis in the third generation is a minimum of two interacting activity systems (Engeström 2001) rather than a single system typical of second-generation analysis.

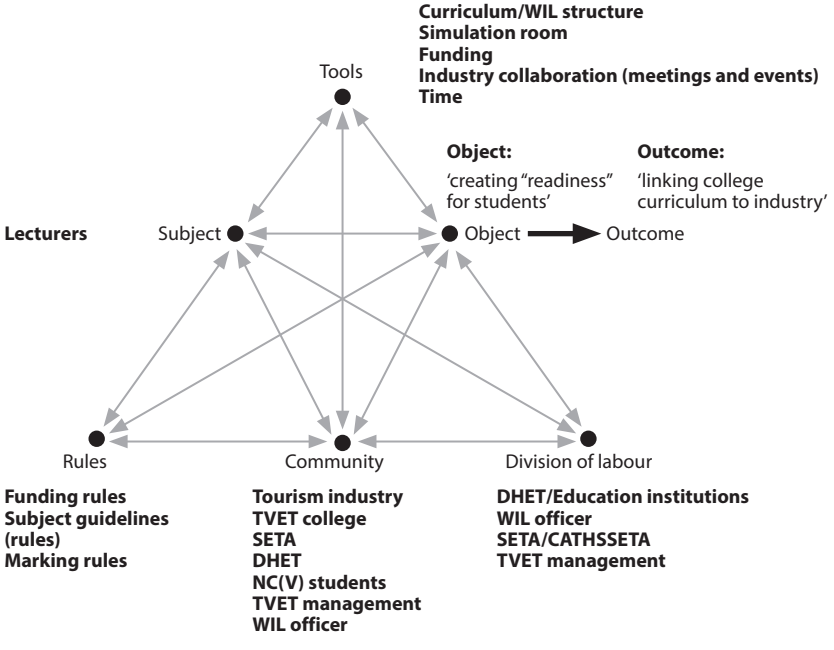
More recently, there is recognition that working with complex societal problems may involve an even larger and heterogeneous grouping of interacting activity systems, known as fourth-generation activity theory. For example, in examining the problem of homelessness, a researcher would need to include the interaction of homeless communities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with local and national government (Engeström & Sannino, 2021).

In the context of the present research, second-generation activity theory is utilised in which WBE is examined as an activity system. Based on the researchers' knowledge of the NC(V) programmes, the 'object' of the system is understood as 'creating "realness" for students', and the 'outcome' is that of 'linking [the] college curriculum to industry'.

In this WBE activity system, the lecturers are the 'subject', as they were asked for their opinions and the 'tools' are the NC(V) curriculum, the simulation room, funding, industry meetings and events, and time.

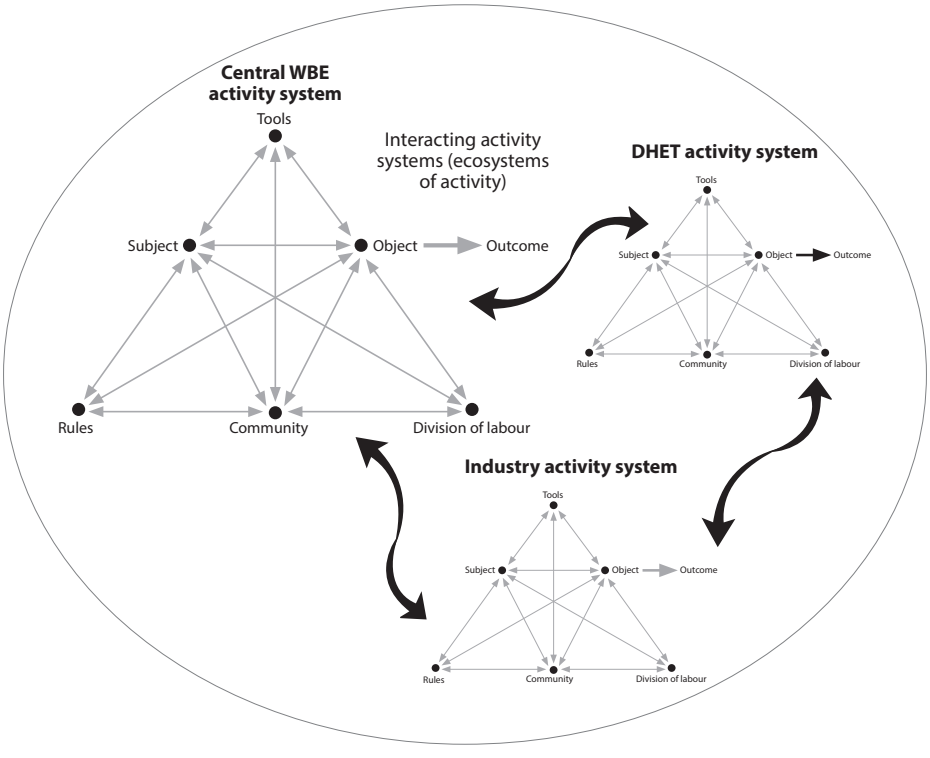
The 'rules' are related to policy documents from TVET management as well as from DHET. The 'community' includes students, lecturers, industry and other stakeholders; and the 'division of labour' refers to how their work on the object is allocated. Figure 2 represents the second-generation activity analysis of the TVET college WBE activity system and provides a picture of the various tools, the rules, the community and the division of labour in the WBE college system and how they interact with one another.

Figure 2
WBE activity system



The WBE system is influenced by neighbouring activity systems. For example, the implementation of WBE is influenced by the policies of DHET and, furthermore, needs to be responsive to the needs of industry, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Interactive activity systems



With reference to Figure 3, WBE implementation can be examined by way of a third-generation activity theory methodology, but not for the purpose of this article. The macro-level restrictive practices have been commented on in the literature (Coetzee, 2012; DHET, 2010, 2013; Njengele et al., 2024; Taylor, 2013; UMALUSI, 2013). However, what are less known are the micro-level restrictive practices hindering the implementation of WBE – which is what this present article focuses on.

Understanding these micro-level restrictions is important, since even if the 'rules' in DHET and other activity systems change so as to benefit WBE, there may still be internal micro tensions that hinder the progress of WBE.

This research therefore concentrates on the internal micro relations of the WBE system. In doing so, it uses a second-generation activity theory approach. According to Engeström (2015), it is crucial to examine activity systems in order to comprehend how people and groups cooperate to accomplish common objectives and how tensions and conflicts inside these systems can drive progress. Tensions can occur in a variety of ways, such as through disagreements over the division of labour, as a result of conflicts between opposing goals, and because of inconsistencies in the rules. Tensions are viewed as generative and productive, rather than simply as issues to be resolved.

Within particular contexts or communities, activity systems are networks with connected activities, roles and divisions of labour (Engestrom & Sannino, 2015). These tensions underpinning the micro-level restrictive practices can be regarded both as dual sources of dysfunction and engines of change and further explain why activity theory is being used not just to map the system but to understand the challenges.

Research methodology

Qualitative in-person group interviews as detailed in Table 1 were held with NC(V) tourism lecturers at five TVET colleges, with one WIL officer from the Western Cape being present. The WIL officer was part of the group interview only for TVET1; no other WIL officers were present during the group interviews for TVET2, TVET3, TVET4 and TVET5. The sole purpose of including the WIL officer was because the person was a lecturer at the applicable TVET college and had significant insight into WBE practices at TVET1.

Data collection

Table 1
Group-interview locations and duration

TVET	WHO	WHERE	TIME	GROUP INTERVIEW
TVET1	6 NC(V) lecturers 1 WIL officer	Bellville	2 hours	Group
TVET2	6 NC(V) lecturers	Cape Town	Group – 1.3 hours	Group – lecturers
TVET3	3 NC(V) lecturers	Muizenberg	Group – 1.3 hours	Group – lecturers
TVET4	4 NC(V) lecturers	Mossel Bay	Group – 1.3 hours	Group – lecturers
TVET5	4 NC(V) lecturers	Vredenburg	Group – 1.3 hours	Group – lecturers

Total: N = 24 participants; total hours = 7.2

Justification for site selection was that the roll-out of the SSACI WBE Internal Continuous Assessment (ICASS) Project was undertaken in the Western Cape at all five of the TVET colleges listed in Table 1. Furthermore, participants were selected because all of them were NC(V) lecturers. The lecturers who took part in the research taught a variety of fundamental subjects (i.e. Mathematical Literacy or English as a first additional language or Life Orientation) or one or more of the four vocational subjects offered at their various TVET colleges within the NC(V) tourism programmes. Most participants had between one and five years' experience of working with NC(V) students, with the remainder having taught NC(V) subjects for more than ten years. The long years of service in teaching NC(V) subjects had given the participants a unique perspective of the restrictive practices in driving WBE since the first ICASS WBE initiative in 2014. All group interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Since the issue of interest in the present research was restrictive practices related to lecturers' roles in WBE and how this might affect the object of WBE, the researchers first considered what lecturers understood the 'object' of the activity system to be. Thereafter, attention shifted to restrictive practices related to lecturer roles that emerged in the interviews. However, other restrictive practices were also raised, for example a lack of financial support for WBE, a lack of weighting and the absence of practical guidance in the subject guidelines. Though these were important restrictions, as illustrated in Figure 2, they are not explored further in this article. As mentioned, they have already been discussed in previous research.

All the restrictive practices raised by the lecturers were first highlighted in each of the transcripts and their relationship to one or other of the activity system elements (tools, rules, etc.) was recorded using colour-coding. This relationship assisted the researchers in analysing the data at a later stage. The next step was to scrutinise those restrictive practices related to lecturer involvement and identify which were reported by more than one TVET college lecturer. These were then identified as the most pressing issues and were further thematised into three main categories: exclusion from industry meetings; exclusion from/lack of communication with WIL officers; and lack of commitment on the part of college management regarding WBE. Table 2 illustrates how the data was organised for further analysis.

Table 2
Example of how data analysis was organised

WIL ACTIVITY SYSTEM ELEMENTS:	ALL RESTRICTIVE PRACTICES FOR WBE:	RESTRICTIVE PRACTICES WBE THEMES:
Subject and community: NC(V) lecturers		
Tools: Curriculum	• No realness for NC(V) tourism students • Lack of practical skills in curriculum • Outdated NC(V) tourism curriculum	
Collaborative meetings, events and functions	• NC(V) lecturers not invited to CATHSSETA or industrial meetings, functions or conferences	• Lecturers not invited to industry meetings, events and functions anymore
Division of labour: TVET management	• Management out of touch with NC(V) student's need for WIL • Management not creating relationship/understanding between the college and industry	• TVET management not supporting WBE for NC(V)
WIL officer	• WIL officers not placing NC(V) students • No funding for NC(V) WIL placements	• WIL officer not including lecturers in WBE process and implementation

Each of the categories was then described in more detail and illustrated with supporting quotes from the interviews.

In activity theory, the researcher does not simply seek to identify difficulties but also to gain a deeper understanding of their origins and nature. To this end, a systematic analysis was conducted using the activity theory triangle (see Figure 2) of the main tensions that underpinned these identified restrictive practices. These tensions were then shown as being between the different elements of the activity system and were indicated with red arrows on the activity triangle (see, for example, Figures 4 and 5).

Ethical considerations

To comply with the principles of ethical research, DHET was approached for permission to conduct the research. DHET noted that consent to conduct this research must first be obtained from the five TVET colleges and comply with DHET policy (DHET, 2016). Using the DHET Request to Conduct Research Application form, permission was obtained from each of the five TVET colleges in the Western Cape (that offer the NC(V) tourism programme). By following the appropriate university protocol, ethical clearance was also obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Education Faculty of the researchers' university.

All interviewees gave informed consent by completing a form in which it was stipulated that no individual identifiers would be collected from any respondent so as to ensure anonymity. This was done prior to collecting any data. Moreover, it was stated that the research results would be used for the present study only and would not be shared with any third party. Ethical requirements such as confidentiality, non-coercion and the right to withdraw from the study at any time were stated explicitly in the informed-consent form.

Ethically, the researchers sought to create a positive and secure environment where lecturers could voice their concerns and frustrations and comment about the WBE system at their TVET colleges without feeling exposed or that their comments could be held against them; hence the guarantee of the anonymity of all the participants in the group interviews.

Research findings and data analysis

In analysing the data, the researchers first identified how the lecturers understood the purpose and benefit of WBE for learning ('object' and 'outcome' – see Figure 2). Thereafter, the focus shifted to restrictive practices inhibiting the 'object' of WBE using the three identified restrictive themes (see Table 2).

Lecturers' understanding of the 'object'

The lecturers' understanding of the 'object' of WBE is that it gives students access to the real world by allowing them to access industry. This will assist students to relate what is happening in practice in the industry to what they are being taught at college. Therefore they strive to work on the 'object' and 'outcome' of the WBE activity system. This understanding, as indicated in the following quotes, was similar to what was initially proposed by the researchers.

> If students have practical industry exposure, they can relate what they experience in the industry to what is taught in class, and this practical experience during WBE will also better equip students to work in industry. … For example, we only focus on the theory, but if our kids can be exposed to these different sectors that is in industry [i.e. transport, accommodation] that can also assist the students to be more exposed in the practical side of what we teach in class.

And:

> What is good about this WBE is our students see what we are teaching them practically, within the workplace. And for them [the students] to actually go out and experience how to speak over the phone, how to communicate with the customers and try to help.

Now that we have discussed the 'object', the focus moves on to restrictive practices inhibiting WBE. This is done using the main themes identified in Table 2.

Restrictive practices at the TVET college that inhibit WBE

Theme 1: Lecturers excluded from industry events (community–tools–object)

One of the main restrictive practices is that, although the TVET colleges do hold internal meetings with industry role players which involve the WIL department and management, these meetings do not include the lecturers who are actually doing the teaching and who work with students daily. In addition, by networking and creating industry connections, lecturers can stay abreast of the latest developments and innovations in the tourism industry, can share these with their students and can provide industry-relevant examples. The quotes below from two different TVET college lecturers reinforce their argument that there is a lack of access to internal college forums comprising industry players:

> And we don't get invited to industry meetings, the WIL officer goes, and the lecturers are not included, which I think is very bad because we are firsthand dealing with the Level 2, 3 and 4 students; we know the dynamics, we know the personality, we know what their needs are and we know where they want to be in industry. But we are not included in any industry meetings with the Federated Hospitality Association of South Africa (FEDHASA), Southern African Tourism Services Association (SATSA), no.

And:

> The Association of Southern African Travel Agents and Travel Advisors (ASATA)/ National Department of Tourism (NDT)/Culture, Art, Tourism, Hospitality and Sport Sector Education Authority (CATHSSETA) meetings? – We're not going there; we used to, not any more. Before there was a WIL department, we were more involved.

Another quote from a lecturer at a different TVET college illustrates the importance of creating connections between lecturers and industry:

> WBE must be managed; it's about relationships … . Before there was a WIL department, we were more involved.

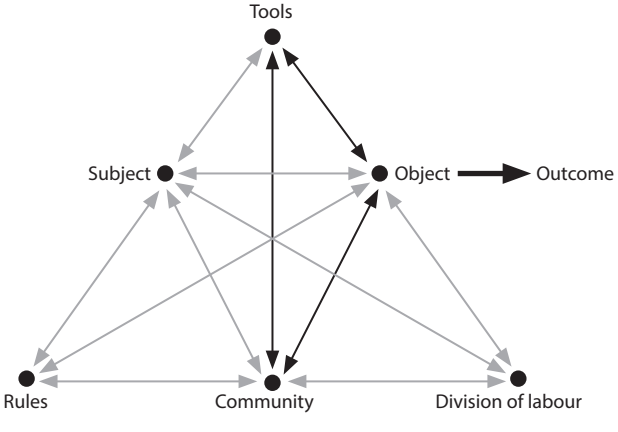
In the past, a few lecturers did attend some of the SATSA meetings, but, since the recent creation of WIL departments at TVET colleges, this no longer happens. It is now standard practice at TVET colleges for WIL department staff to now receive these invitations.

Here, the tension occurs between the 'community' (lecturers, industry role players, WIL department and TVET management) and the 'tools' (meetings, functions and events) which should enable the lecturers to collaborate with industry in order to drive WBE, to stay up to date as regards industry and to create relationships with industry that will lead to placement for WBE students.

This restrictive practice can be seen as originating from a systemic tension between the 'community' (lecturers and industry representatives) and the collaborative 'tools' (meetings, events and functions) that the key actors need in order to work towards the object of implementing WBE. Such tension could thus be attributed in practice to the lack of collaborative 'tools' (meetings, functions, events and career guidance) available to the college lecturers to connect them and the TVET college to the industry.

Figure 4 illustrates the tension taking place within the WBE activity system between the 'community' and the 'tools' which may affect the 'object' of the activity system.

Figure 4
Community–tool–object tension



Theme 2: WIL officers not supporting NC(V) (subject–division of labour–object)

Another internal tension from the lecturers' perspective is lack of support from the WIL department in placing NC(V) students for WBE, as well as lecturers not being involved in WBE. WIL officers at most of the colleges interviewed are not placing NC(V) students for WBE but rather only NATED N6 students entering industry for 18 months. The lecturers commented as follows on WIL officers not placing NC(V) tourism students at their colleges:

> WIL departments are responsible for the placement of the students, to facilitate the placement and help the student; that's why they are there, but that is not happening. … In terms of support for NC(V), it is very minimal, due to funding constraints, and the funding only becom[ing] periodically available now.

and

> …WIL officer not making the effort, concerted effort, to say: 'I'm not just here to support NATED; I'm here to support NC(V)'. We are missing that gap completely; everything is NATED, NATED, NATED.

Another frustration mentioned by lecturers is that WIL officers are placing students in various industries without having a basic understanding of the tourism industry, which would assist them in finding tourism companies to approach for placements. This is where lecturers could assist:

> WIL officer doesn't know the tourism companies – they place left, right and centre. Tick the box, it doesn't work like that.

A lecturer also commented on how lecturers could assist WIL officers:

> As a tourism practitioner I know places, hotels. So it's easy for me to match a personality because I know that student and the company.

Thus, the expertise of lecturers and their knowledge of both the field and their students are not always acknowledged by the colleges. Rudman and Meiring (2018) argue that, while improvement in quality at the college level is concentrated on enhancing lecturers' credentials, it should also value their expert knowledge of the field and of students (Wedekind, 2010).

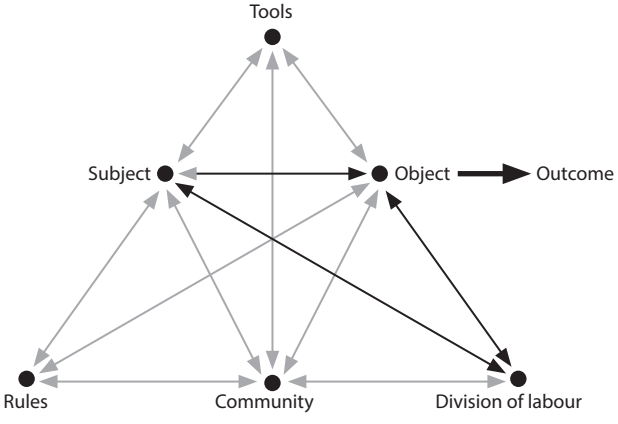
This tension is occurring between the 'subject', the lecturers who understand their professional field and their students and the other actors who play a role in WBE, in this case the WIL officers. The division of labour here is unequal, with the WIL officers taking the more dominant role. Such an unequal division of roles is, from the lecturers' perspective, constraining the lecturers' work on the object of the system.

In addition, lecturers believe that TVET management should do more to drive WBE and to create links with industry so as to improve the placements of NC(V) students. However, this role has been assigned to the relatively recently introduced WIL officers, who are not communicating with the lecturers who know their subject field and the capabilities of the students.

> The powers that be don't think about that, the mind-set of the student, because they're not on the ground level, they don't see what we [the lecturers] see.

Figure 5 below illustrates tensions between the 'subjects' (lecturers) and the 'division of labour' (WIL officers and TVET management), which restricts lecturers from achieving the 'object' or desired goal of the activity system.

Figure 5
Subject–division of labour–object tension



A further theme involving subject–division of labour–object is that of management's focus.

Theme 3: Management focus on 'bums on seats' vs WBE for quality

When it comes to TVET management, lecturers criticised TVET management's lack of partnerships and relationships as being a hindrance to student placement, for example:

> Management will always be obsessed with a role player or a stakeholder that will be funding or donating things. They'll be obsessed and build that relationship, but any other relationship will be like given to the WIL department to facilitate.

Lecturers were also frustrated by the lack of funding allocated to WBE for NC(V) students. College management appears not to be focusing on these students. It would seem as if TVET management has contradictory motives; on the one hand, it wants 'bums on seats' (for obtaining government funding), but, on the other, it does not want to use the funding

accrued from student subsidies for NC(V) WBE. These funds are supposed to support the entire curriculum, of which WBE is an important part.

> They're thinking about numbers [pass rates], not thinking of the mind-set of the student.
>
> They're not on-the-ground people because they don't interact with the students on the level that we do so they don't see the benefit it [WBE] would have for the student … .
>
> They are quick to say when you have a failure and what is your intervention. But they're just a bum on a seat, and the number that you have to meet.

The restrictive practices described above can be seen as arising from tensions between the 'subject' (lecturers) and the 'division of labour' (TVET management). This tension can be seen as constraining the lecturers' work on the 'object' of 'creating a real-world experience' for students as illustrated in Figure 5.

Summary of the results

The NC(V) lecturers believe that successful WBE is being inhibited by certain restrictive practices at the micro level within the TVET activity system. They argue that they should be included when it comes to industry events and meetings in order, first, to advocate for NC(V) and what NC(V) graduates are able to do in the industry, and, second, to help the industry understand the NC(V) tourism qualification. Other internal restrictive practices relate to the WIL department not placing NC(V) students for WBE but only NATED students. The final restrictive theme is that TVET management is not prioritising WBE for NC(V) and that there is a lack of connection between TVET college and industry, thus hindering placements for students.

These restrictions can be understood by analysing them as tensions in the activity system community and in the division of labour as lecturers attempt to work towards the object of WBE.

Discussion

The researchers agree with Billett (2003, 2009), Konkola (2007), McRae (2015) and Govender and Wait (2017) that WBE gives students a chance to learn about real-life processes, which may lead to access to real job opportunities. However, the implementation of WBE for vocational students has, at best, been patchy (Papier, 2010). The macro-level restrictive practices mentioned in the literature which have led to this can be attributed to a lack of funding for WBE (Njengele et al., 2024), to policy documents not assigning a weighting to WBE (Taylor, 2013) and to a poor relationship between industry and colleges (Wedekind et al., 2024). However, what has not been discussed to any great extent is the important role lecturers can play in supporting WBE.

This research focuses specifically on the micro-level restrictive practices that may hinder lecturer involvement, such as their exclusion from engagement in WBE (see Table 2, Figures 4 and 5). However, it is argued that addressing macro-level restrictive practices alone is insufficient; internal micro-level barriers would continue to impede effective WBE implementation.

In agreement with this argument, Maseko (2018), Paterson et al. (2017) and Wedekind (2010) suggest that academics need to be involved in implementing WBE and that management needs to ensure the integration of WBE into the curriculum. However, these authors are less clear on how this could be done in colleges.

As Engeström & Sannino (2015b, PowerPoint presentation, slide no. 2) argues, the activity system analysis drawn from activity theory at the very least allows researchers to 'clarify, elucidate, and essentialize' what is actually happening in an organisation. Using activity theory for our analysis has helped to understand what underpins the restrictive practices and the implications of the identified activity theory tensions (the lack of collaborative tools, divisions of labour) in working on the object of implementing WBE. Activity theory has therefore given us a systemic understanding (Engeström, 2001) of the challenges experienced by staff. In other words, it is not simply a matter of interpersonal difficulty; rather, it is a difficulty that resides within the TVET college system itself. Applying this theory allows us to pinpoint tensions (as highlighted in Figures 4 and 5) between components of the activity system that underpin the restrictive practices observed and, consequently, to determine what aspects of the system need to be addressed in order to improve WBE. In activity terms, the tensions are key and are points for future discussion and development. These disruptions need to be made visible if the patchy implementation of WBE for the benefit of students and the college is to be addressed.

Two avenues of further exploration that draw on activity system analysis can be proposed. First, college staff (management, WIL officers and lecturers) themselves could be presented with the 'Engeström triangle' so that systemic tensions in WBE can be exposed. This may lead to a discussion focused on what new practices could be initiated to resolve some of the current problematic issues with WBE. What would need to be exposed would be tensions arising from thinking in silos so that a more collaborative and mutually beneficial approach could be adopted. Implementation of this activity theory approach to understanding and attempting to resolve organisational WBE issues and tensions at the university level has been attempted with some success by Spante et al. (2025). In their research, university lecturers at one institution involved with implementing and monitoring WBE highlighted difficulties with their WBE work. Thereafter, they worked collaboratively on understanding these difficulties as systemic and historically rooted tensions within the WBE activity system. This provided a stimulus for future work on improving the system so as to include more collaborative engagements. Such a systems analysis approach could be further augmented if industry representatives could, as part of the WBE 'community', also be involved and their interests in and issues with WBE highlighted.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to highlight internal restrictive practices at the micro level that may be inhibiting WBE. Using activity theory analysis assisted in arriving at a systemic and clearer understanding of the restrictions. As indicated by UMALUSI (2013), more research is needed into all stakeholders working together to drive practical training (colleges working in partnership with industry), an issue to which this article has attempted to contribute. Furthermore, by focusing on lecturers' experiences of WBE at the micro level, the article addresses a gap in the current research.

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