



Symposium Programme 2 and 3 November 2021, Groningen

Focus on Agency: Track & Trace, Unlock & Unblock
Examples of alternative approaches to development research

This symposium is occasioned by three remarkable PhD dissertations in the field of learning and development. All three concern strategies of fostering agency of those less heard: of school children and teachers in a local school in Groningen, of youth and their educators in vocational education in Uganda, and of lifelong learning practitioners in NGOs in Uganda. All three apply Action Research methods aimed at freeing, 'unlocking', the agency of participants and their communities. This symposium discusses promises of these studies for improved linking of the worlds of Education and Work and explores challenges and promises of Action Research in various fields. The Concept Note of the conference (attached) explores these challenges in terms of the fundamental tasks of 'Tracking & Tracing' as well as 'Unlocking & Unblocking' of agency. The programme includes the festive inaugural ceremony of Dr Josje van der Linden, the new UNESCO Chair holder in *Lifelong Learning, Youth and Work* at Gulu University in Uganda.

Programme Tuesday November 2, 2021 (venue: Van Swinderenhuys. Oude Boteringestraat 19)

9.00 Welcome, introduction of programme and participants (Dr Josje van der Linden)

9.15 Short presentations of dissertation studies

- Marit Blaak and Sophia Irepu: *The normative practitioner: adding value to organisational learning in education NGOs in Uganda*
- Robert Jjuuko and Maria Nandago: *Youth transition, agricultural education and employment in Uganda: freeing individual agency*
- Nathalie Beekman and Mirjam Peppinkhuizen: *Room for Polyphony. Action research into the potential significance of an art & philosophy lab for free action in education*

10.15 Coffee/tea break

10.45 Panel on **Research Methodology and Agency: Track & Trace, Unlock & Unblock**

Prof Gert Biesta, Prof Tineke Abma, Dr Victor Friedman (chair: Dr Cuthbert Tukundane)

12.00 Lunch break

13.00 Lecture Dr Pieter Boele van Hensbroek: *Can one do Action Research in Intellectual History? Reviving the agency of 19th century 'Modernisation-From-Indigenous-Roots' intellectuals in Asia and Africa*. Discussants: Dr Crispin Akakpo and Prof Evert van der Zweerde.

14.15 Tea Break

14.30 Inauguration ceremony UNESCO Chair 'Lifelong learning, youth and work'

- Prof Tjalling Halbertsma, Director GSG, chair person
- Prof Jacques Zeelen, departing chair holder
- Prof George Openjuru, Vice chancellor Gulu University
- Dr Josje van der Linden, new chair holder
- Prof Ciska Wijmenga, Rector magnificus University of Groningen

Programme Wednesday November 3, 2021 (venue: Het Kasteel, Melkweg 1, Groningen)

9.30 Education and educational professionals: challenges to the agency of learners and professionals; what is needed to overcome these? (Chair: Marco Mazereeuw)

- Dr Cuthbert Tukundane (Uganda Martyrs University, Uganda)
- Prof Simon McGrath (University of Nottingham, UK)
- Prof Alexander Minnaert (University of Groningen)

11.00 Coffee/tea break

11.30 Work, workplace learning and the link to education: challenges to the agency of learners; what is needed to overcome these? (Chair: Josje van der Linden)

- Prof Stephanie Allais (University of Witwatersrand, South Africa)
- Prof Volker Wedekind (University of Nottingham, UK)
- Dr Marco Mazereeuw (University of Groningen/Stenden-NHL)

13.00 Lunch

14.00 Report on 'Future-proof technical craftsmanship' (TTV) project; linking education and employers in innovative vocational education in Groningen

- Short movie on the cooperation project
- Explanation and discussion by Inger Smid (researcher), Marco Mazereeuw (project director 2), Maaïke Smulders (researcher), Jacques Zeelen (project director 1)

15.00 Coffee/tea break

15.15 What type of research is needed for Unlocking & Unblocking agency? What can Higher Education do? (Chair: Pieter Boele van Hensbroek)

- Prof George Openjuru (Gulu University, Uganda)
- Dr Victor Friedman (Max Stern Yezreel Valley College, Israel)
- Prof Hinke Haisma (University of Groningen)
- Prof Johannes Westberg (University of Groningen)
- Prof Jacques Zeelen (University of Groningen/ Gulu University)

17.00 Drinks and snacks



Focus on Agency: Track & Trace, Unlock & Unblock (Concept Note) Examples of alternative approaches to development research

Unlocking agency is the core aim and key mean of development: it is through the drive of individuals and communities that their desired forms of life can materialise, and it is up to organisations and society at large to create conducive contexts for this drive. But all this requires hard work: to stimulate self-confidence, to enhance social collaboration, to change organisations and institutions, and to counteract oppressive structures. What is the role here for research? What types of research and research methods are suitable? And how to involve local actors and professionals in joint knowledge production?

This symposium discusses challenges of research in various fields which aim at unlocking agency. Those challenges are real, because the ideas, motivations and drives of actors are not readily accessible, to be picked up via a questionnaire, or facilitated by simple consultation and intervention routines; they cannot be accessed as aspects of 'behaviour', but concern understanding 'intentional action' of actors in their specific contexts. The PhD studies in Lifelong Learning research occasioning this conference were conducted in the tradition of Action Research, an approach that is highly agency-centred. But the idea of the recovery of agency of actors may also be a guide to historical, political, or cultural research. In a way, movements in academia today to 'decolonise' and recover 'indigenous' voices can be seen as attempts to unlock agency at a more collective level, of long-established societies suffering severe marginalisation in the past centuries up to today. Such a broad concept of agency can open up challenging research questions in many fields.

The notions of Track & Trace, as well as Unlock & Unblock point to key dimensions that need to be explored, where the first two point more to the challenges of the researcher and the second two to those of the practitioner or social activist. **'Tracking'** would mean gaining a real understanding of the life-world and intentionality of actors and it thus requires some form of hermeneutics, of grasping the understanding of situations and ideas, and meaning of words among the actors themselves. **'Tracing'** points to yet another complication, namely that the understandings and motivations of actors themselves evolve during processes of change. This vital dynamic in emancipation processes is what Action Research tries to both induce and study. But such agency-dynamics can also be a focus in studies of cultural change and the history of ideas, when such research avoids taking 'cultures', knowledge systems, movements, or single intellectuals as ready-made things. 'Tracing' then means grasping the dynamics of internal cultural change and creative reinvention and adaptation that shapes the cultural and political agency of communities.

The notion of **'Unlock'** points at the fact that processes of change and emancipation require a change in the actors and their communities themselves. In most contexts, it is not enough to change the parameters in which actors operate because change requires creating democratic space, involvement, learning and unlearning. This is the classic social activists work, but it is also vital in action research and the development of new types of professionalisation. Examples from the dissertations discussed are building the self-esteem of rural youths to become innovative agriculturalists, strengthening the capacities of NGO staff or educators and using art and philosophy in school to unlock the voice and foster the self-confidence of children in disadvantaged communities. The notion of **'Unblock'**, finally, points to the many visible and invisible mechanism that prevent persons from reflecting and acting. The unblocking actions need a focus on local, national and global power mechanisms and economic exploitation, but also the organisational logics of NGOs in the development sector, as is analysed in one of the dissertations discussed. Again, 'Unblocking' is also a task for cultural research by unmasking the recycling of racial and colonial stereotypes, and by recovering the dynamics of cultural and historical agency.

Mission of the conference

In the current policy discourse about development-related research and practice, much is promised in terms of participation, making use of local knowledge and the need for partnerships, but ‘unlocking agency’ hardly materialises. This raises questions about current managerial approaches in development organisations, but also questions about methodological approaches in development research. Is the current focus on evidence-based and randomised control trials enough to effectively track, trace and unlock the agency of learners, professionals and communities? What can research approaches that actually engage local youth, educators, institutions and policy makers in the research process achieve more? The conference *Focus on Agency: Track & Trace, Unlock & Unblock* aims at bringing together exemplary studies and reflections thereon. It is organised at the occasion of the completion of three PhD studies, conducted in Uganda and the Netherlands, and the farewell of two professors:

<p>The study ‘Room for Polyphony’ by Nathalie Beekman investigates the potential significance of an art & philosophy lab for free action in education. The rationale for this study is a much-heard criticism in the field of education, namely that the past decades saw a tendency towards a strong degree of complexity reduction and control, an attitude that is referred to in this study as ‘fixed grip’. There is too little room for children’s own voices, and teachers often inadvertently become mere executors educational policies. By means of extensive experiments in the art & philosophy lab in a primary school in Groningen innovative types of agency could develop. PhD defence Monday November 1 2.30 pm</p>	<p>Robert Jjuuko investigates Youth transition, agricultural education and employment in Uganda. He problematises narratives that attempt to frame young people as authors of their own troubled transitions, especially the ‘young people dislike agriculture’ narrative. Jjuuko’s investigates how to free agency of students and educators in the systemic institutional environment of an agricultural college. The interventionist action research phase of this study involved intensive collaborative inquiry into ways of teaching agriculture that improve students’ learning and labour market outcomes. PhD Defence Thursday November 4 12.45 pm</p>	<p>Marit Blaak in her dissertation ‘The normative practitioner: adding value to organisational learning in education NGOs in Uganda’ opens the black box of one of the main providers of lifelong learning interventions in Uganda. As intermediaries between funders, policy makers and communities, NGOs take up a unique position and have to navigate conflicting interests amidst resource constraints. In particular, this action research project focusses on how organisational learning can be positioned to help NGOs generate knowledge about the complex realities of learners, test innovations and tailor activities to local conditions. PhD Defence Thursday November 4 4.15 pm</p>
<p>One of the two scholars leaving the university is Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, who studies historical political discourses in Africa and Asia, aiming at recovering the intriguing world of ideas of innovative intellectuals in a period before colonial domination blocked all avenues for self-development. He published on the notion of ‘cultural citizenship’ and in the field of Comparative Political Theory. He was one of the founders in 1987 of the African journal <i>Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy</i>, and taught Philosophy at the University of Zambia as well as Political Philosophy and Development Studies at the University of Groningen</p>	<p>The second scholar is Jacques Zeelen. In the first period of his working life he was involved in action research in mental health, particular focusing on creating conversational space for people with psychological suffering and enhancing the agency of the daily involved practitioners. From 1997 onwards he became involved in lifelong learning, youth and work in several sub-Saharan countries, combining this with research in the Netherlands into vocational education. He taught from 1998 to 2004 at Limpopo University (previously University of the North) in South Africa, and was from 2014 GSG professor in Lifelong Learning and Development. Until recently he also held the UNESCO Chair ‘Lifelong Learning, Youth and Work’ at Gulu University in Uganda.</p>	