Changing Practice course: Olifants

Monthly report: May 2017

Sub-grantee: Environmental Monitoring Group in partnership with the Environmental Learning Research Centre, Rhodes University

Changing Practice: Olifants participants, 25\textsuperscript{th} May 2017
**Introduction**

In the month of May the EMG/ELRC ‘Changing Practice’ course kicked off with the first ‘working together’ Module one. This was followed by the Changing Practice participants putting together a budget and beginning their ‘Change Projects’

**Specific Activities**

**Logistics and media**

*Contracting a fourth mentor for the course*

In the eleventh hour we were able to contract Stella Hogan as a mentor on the Changing Practice course. This was made possible by Professor Heila Lotz-Sisitka allocating her days on the project to Stella which partly covers Stella’s contract. What Stella offers a long history of working with civil society as well as the bridge between the Changing Practice course and the ongoing work of AWARD with civil society. This was the missing link that EMG staff hoped would be filled by an AWARD Change Project (as in a staff from AWARD would put together a team to attend the course). What this also gives us is a sense of continuity and connection to the CSO Indaba’s. We are very grateful to Professor Lotz-Sisitka for making this possible and to Stella who has been willing to join our team at such short notice. Other mentors are myself (Jane Burt), December Ndlhovu (who did the last Changing Practice course and is an active participant in the CSO indaba’s) and Thelma Nkosi (coordinator of the Mpumalanga Water Caucus)

*Changing Practice website*

It has been decided not to update the Changing Practice website or to use it for this course. This is because the contract was finalised so late in the day with AWARD that it did not give us time to contract a developer and plan for the redesign. The Changing Practice networked website will be built during this year and is being sponsored by a data media firm in Johannesburg, who has also agreed to make the platform open source. It will, more than likely, be up and running by the end of the year for the next iteration of the Changing Practice course. The funds for the website have been re-allocated to top up Stella’s contract and to possibly fund a reflection meeting where AWARD staff, EMG staff, SAWC members and Changing practice participants can reflect on what is emerging from the Change Projects and how these can be upscaled through various networks and movements.

*Media plans*

I (Jane Burt) met with EMG’s media and comms person, Taryn Pereira. It was a strategic meeting to consider how to deal with the many media platforms that are available for sharing what comes out of the Changing Practice course. We agreed to add a blog page to the EMG website to document the process of the course. During Module two we will encourage participants to write short pieces for the blog. Once the ‘Our Olifants’ website is up again we will also use this platform to share stories from the course. The monthly report will be sent to the ELRC to harvest stories for their T-Learning site. Taryn will also attempt to make a weekly facebook post about the course and post this on the EMG Facebook page with a link to the ELRC, AWARD, Our Olifants and CSO page. This means that AWARD and ELRC staff can repost the story if they wish.

*Choosing organisations for the course*

It was a tight turn around between sending out the application forms and choosing participants but with a bit of luck we managed. Eleven organisations applied. We chose six
organisations to participate in the course. Selection was done by a team of people consisting of: two staff members of EMG, a representative of the SAWC and a consultant from AWARD.

There were some tensions around the selection process. Two organisations only submitted one participant. Both their proposals were strong so we offered the organisations a place on the course if they agreed to collaborate - which they did. However, at a follow up CSO indaba a member of one of the organisations approached the organisers of the Indaba to express dissatisfaction with the selection process. She said that she was supposed to have been included in one of the application forms and had not been. Between the organisers, myself and the coordinator of the MWC, to which both organisations belonged, we were able to work out that people who were nominated, by their organisation, to attend the course were not included in the application form. To resolve the issue we asked the two organisations, involved in the dispute, to resubmit their application. They were given two choices:
1. to submit a joint application form of the two organisations giving attention to gender equality
2. to submit separate proposals knowing that one of the organisations would then not be chosen.

The organisations agreed to go with the second option.

There was also some unhappiness by organisations that submitted after the deadline and were angry that they were not included in the selection process.

Although it was stressful to deal with these tensions it does point to how organisations want to be involved in courses like this and are desperate for opportunities. Given the high levels of unemployment in the catchment it is not surprising that any opportunity is taken on with enthusiasm and there is anxiety and disappointment about getting chosen.

The final organisations accepted for the course are:
- Action Voices
- CULISA
- Young Water Professionals
- Come-Act
- Itumuleng Youth Project
- Khulumani
- Mpumalanga Water Caucus
- Sekhukhune Environmental Justice Network

Module 1: First ‘work together’ session of the Changing Practice course

The theme of the first module is ‘investigating context and practice’. The workshop introduces participating organisations to what this means at a personal, relational and structural level. This is done by weaving between personal experience to local contextual experience to what this means more broadly for the work of an activist within the current national and global context. There is also a strong focus on what practice and context means materially – as in how does it manifest in relation to the environment and the real outcomes context and practice have on human and non-humans.

As with all the previous Changing practice courses, the learning approach and pedagogy is transparent and the course begins with a dialogue about learning, knowledge and education. We share how the course has been designed as a transformative learning process within an
emancipatory pedagogy. We also explore together what it means to learn and our own personal experiences of learning – both positive and negative. These experiences are then related to the kind of learning the Changing Practice course wishes to initiate. Some of the learning experiences that participants shared were painful and demeaning and the conversation soon progressed to considering how learning is not a neutral process but can be designed to be emancipatory or to perpetuate power imbalances and inequality. This is equally so with how we consider our relationship with the environment. The view of nature as something to dominate can be reinforced or challenged through an educational process.

No one educates anyone else nor do we educate ourselves, we educate one another in communion in the context of living in this world.

~ Paulo Freire

From the previous course we realised that participants have often experienced varied degrees of trauma because of the nature of South African society or in their work as activists. For this course we wanted to consciously acknowledge this and introduce simple processes that could be healing and are, at least, relaxing and centering. We were hoping to do this through a healing process known as ‘working with the elements’ but unfortunately Jessica Wilson, who is trained to run this process, was unable to attend the course due to an illness. Instead we introduced what is known as healing relaxation exercises where participants are encouraged to centre themselves in their bodies and learn to bring themselves back to the present moment. We introduced it as an opportunity to become aware of our inner environment. By noticing our inner environment we begin to see our reactions and responses to our outer environment and each other. On the second day we started off with this practice. Participants were unusually receptive to the practice and found it hugely beneficial. We are hoping to pick up on the elements work in Module 2.
The rest of the second day was spent exploring context and practice by starting with participants sharing their pre-course assignments which introduced their 'Change Projects' to the group. This was followed by an introduction to context and practice and a dialogue about what these concepts mean if we consider our own work contexts. This included some exercises of practicing exploring context and practice. An additional session was added to the day because during the pre-course assignment presentations participants started to see links between their Change Project and others in the group. The after hours session explored these connections and also gave the group more time to give each other advice and contact that may be useful to them.
The morning of Day 2 was a fieldtrip which CULISA and Action Voices organised. It was an opportunity to again practice observing and questioning context and practice. The fieldtrip was called the ‘toxic tour’ and was a shocking experience for all involved. Although extremely difficult to witness everyone expressed how important it was to have experienced it as it showed them the top of the catchment and the horror of what happens here which should the a concern of everyone in the Olifants. We ran a healing relaxation session after the tour as many of us felt overwhelmed by what we had witnessed.
The toxic tour, 24th May 2017

The toxic tour, 24th May 2017
We then moved into a brief dialogue on climate change where participants were asked to consider how they contribute to climate change and how climate change affects them. The intention of this was to both situate climate change within our own lives as well as get a sense of the groups perceptions of climate change – what they understood and what was confusing for them. Most of the group understood the basic facts about climate change. Some in the group held a few conspiracy theories, such as climate change is a problem only because white people can’t live the heat whereas black people are made for warm climates. There was also a discussion about what climate change meant in the context of African spiritual beliefs. What was most apparent was a deep sense of disempowerment around climate change, not so much in terms of knowledge but a feeling of not knowing what was happening, what negotiations were being held and how ordinary people and civil society is involved in these negotiations and decisions. Listening to the dialogue there was a sense, from the group, that there are organisations and governments are making decisions which are not communicated to civil society nor do the participants know what platforms exist (if any) for them to participate in. It is the power dynamics of climate change and questions about who makes the decisions and negotiates on behalf of South African citizens that concerns participants.
Writing about how climate change is a part of our lives.

After the climate change dialogues we ran a gender dialogues using the Freirian fish bowl approach. The question posed to the fish bowl was: how does gender impact on your change project? The participants quickly went to the core of how gender inequalities were experienced in their own lives and in their communities as well as how culture and religion exacerbate gender inequalities. Some strong patriarchal narratives also emerged which were deeply upsetting to some of the members of the group. The dialogues were very challenging for all of us including myself (Jane). It surfaced the perceptions of the group around gender roles and stereotypes, how these manifest on social structure and touched on some deep experiences that the women held of being both dominated and excluded because they are women. Dialogues also started emerging around how women are the most vulnerable when it comes to environmental degradation and climate change although most of these conversations were started by men and in an objectified way whereas the women in the group wanted to keep the conversation at the raw edge of what it meant for women, and particularly the women in this room, to be discriminated against particularly when it came to their desire to be change agents in the world and to participate in, and lead, movements. The implicit violence that sits within the relations between men and women emerged through the dialogues leaving us all shaken. To move the dialogues out of speech and into our bodies we ended off the session by each one of us making an image of how we felt right now. These images were powerful, painful and challenging which some people expressed as being ‘louder than words’. When doing image work there it is very difficult not to be direct and mostly honest. Words can be curated across timeframes (we can use words to distance, other and objectify) whereas the body can only express exactly what is happening right in the
moment. We can also, as participants, hear the body more clearly than when we listen to words which we are already forming counter arguments or agreements to. Listening to images forces our speech to be silent and for us to listen to the gestures that are performed in the space in front of us.

The final day started with a check in session where we touched base on how we all felt after the very intense gender session and fieldtrip of the previous day. What was apparent and surprising is that the group had formed a very strong bond by going through a very honest and challenging experience together. The interactions were grounded and real. We ended our check in by getting an object from the external environment that represented our vulnerabilities as change agents and how the group can, in solidarity, respect and be gentle with these vulnerabilities.

This is what my vulnerability is and what the group brings to me.
Our solidarity

The rest of the morning was spent getting to know the first assignment and what it means for the change project. We also discussed how to put together a budget and the process of applying for their budget to do their first assignment. We discussed the assessment process and the mentorship process. Finally we visited the social media options available to the group which will be further explored during Module 2 when we look at what it means to build a knowledge network.

Celebrating and enjoying our solidarity.

The facilitation and mentorship team remained for one more day where we had a reflection session. The reflections will be captured in Deliverble 3 of this sub-grant.
Overview of participating organisations Change Projects

Below is a brief overview of the participating organisations change projects as expressed in their pre-course assignment presentations. Participants often report back on their Change Projects over the Changing Practice whatsapp group and the Olifants CSO whatsapp groups. These stories will be recorded on subsequent monthly reports. We will also share brief summaries of their pre-course assignments in the June monthly report.

1. **Action Voices: Upper Olifants Catchment**—presented by Lorraine Kakaza
   Action voices are made up of community monitors under the Benchmark Foundation. They are based around Vosman informal settlements in Witbank.
   **Challenges**
   Pollutants like the Acid Mine Drainage (AMD), illegal waste dumping, dead carcasses and sewer-spillage pollutes their rivers. Destruction of wetlands by mining activities. Spiritual water users use dirty water for baptizing and performing other related rituals and ceremonies.
   **Focus of their Change Project:**
   The focus of their Change Project is on wetlands, indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and the Adopt-A- River activities.

2. **CULISA: Upper Olifants Catchment**—presented by Elvis Komane
   CULISA have been engaging Evra Highveld steel about their calcite stock pile that they dump in the public domain. Wind and rain takes the toxic dump to the Olifants River tributaries and dust is blown into informal settlements causing TB and kidney related sicknesses in the community of Vosman and immediate vicinity.
   **Challenges**
   Calcite dumped by mining companies in communities and chrome falling off trucks in the informal settlements.
   **Focus of their Change Project:**
   CULISA will be focusing on Corporate Compliance to try to force the mining companies to comply with their license conditions.

3. **Come Act: Middle Olifants Catchment**—presented by Elton Thobejane
   People are forced to fetch water from the mountains because water is polluted by mining activities in and around Burgersfort area.
   **Challenges**
   Water pollution by mining activities, cracking houses by mine blasting activities in Mokgope village, retrenchment of mine workers to make way for machines and availability of water for domestic use.
   **Focus of their Change Project:**
   Come Act will focus on Corporate Compliance of the mines that pollute the rivers.

4. **Itumeleng: Middle Olifants**—presented by Tshepo Sibiya
   Recently thirteen (13) people died after drinking water from the local stream in Tubatse, Steelport. During illegal waste cleaning activity they found “toxic health care risk waste” like tablets dumped within children’s reach.
   **Challenges**
   Pollution by mining activities, illegal dumping of disposable nappies, disposable of health risk waste within children and community reach.
   **Focus of their Change Project:**
   Itumeleng will focus on local river pollution and illegal waste cleaning.
5. Sekhukhune Environmental Justice Network (SEJN): Middle Olifants Catchment – presented by Mmathapelo Thobejane
In 2014 about seven (7) goats and cows died from polluted water caused by the mining activities and affects ten (10) villages in Burgersfort.

Challenges
Water pollution, livestock poisoning by water from the mining activities.

Focus of their Change Project:
Water pollution

Khulumani is involved with the school greening program, the Eco --School outreach. They have got a piece of land given to them by the school to start a garden.

Challenges
Children are not interested in farming. It is difficult to mobilize school children for agricultural activities.

Focus of their change Project:
Agriculture for livelihoods.

7. Madadeni
Mpumalanga Water Caucus has an interest in water and environmental conservation. They are faced with water shortages for both agriculture and farming. Most water is allocated to the sugar cane farmers with little attention to domestic water challenges.

Challenges
Water shortage, illegal waste dumping and sand mining (both wet and dry).

Focus of their Change Project:
Water and land use for small scale farming.

8. Young Water Professionals (YWP): Lower Olifants Catchment – presented by Ivo Arrey
YWP is a group of young professionals that have an interest on the quality of water in the lower Olifants Catchment. They have the expertise and infrastructure for carrying out water quality tests.

Challenges
Heavy metal pollution of the Olifants catchment, dead organisms (fishes etc)

Focus of their Change Project:
Land, water, energy and river health as well monitoring the water quality of the lower Olifants catchment.

Highlights

The highlight of the month has been meeting the passionate civil society organisations of the Olifants catchment and working with them during Module one. It has challenged all the facilitators to think of clearer ways of networking CSO work into broader networks and movements so as to upscale the very important work they are doing in the catchment.

Concluding Remarks

Running this course is a privilege, a painful and joyful privilege because to fully engage in and immerse oneself in a pedagogy for the oppressed means owning up to the oppressor and oppressed internally and externally. This does not only mean the individual oppressor and
oppressed but the way in which inequity and injustice is structured into the institutions and organisations of which we are a part, the cultures out of which we emerge and the relationships we engage in and form. It also emerges out of the experience of the non-human and the slow violence that is being inflicted upon the earth and so ourselves. Running this course continually teaches us this and forces us to be constantly alert, to continually read the world and, more importantly, engage in the muddling through that is the journey towards social and environmental justice. Jessica Wilson could not make Module one due to sickness. She was very disappointed not to be there. In a thank you note to the facilitators she shared with us how her mother had met Paulo Freire at a conference and asked him for some advice on her work. He said he can’t give advice, he could only talk in parables and as educators we had to enter the mud together and only once we were all fully covered, could a teacher stand up.