

**Enhancing personal and corporate values to  
reduce toxicity in a TVET College environment:  
a living theory of organisational development**

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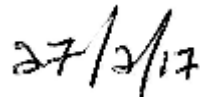
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## DECLARATION

I the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized initial 'P' followed by several loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Signature

A handwritten date in black ink, written as '27/2/17'.

Date

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated firstly, to those employees, managers, leaders, and subordinates who come to work daily, hurting, due to the emotional and psychological toxicity they experience from toxic leaders, toxic followers and toxic environments. Secondly and more importantly to my parents, who instilled in me at a young age the love for others and to display a caring, compassionate spirit for the underdog, down trodden, and oppressed in society. Were they alive today, they too could have celebrate and shared in the joy of this work.

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## **ABSTRACT**

As an HRD manager in a Technical Vocational Education and Training college in South Africa, I am aware that these colleges face various systemic challenges that impact negatively on employee wellbeing. I have first-hand experience of workplace toxicity that negatively affected my health and that of my fellow managers who report to the Senior Management Team at the corporate centre of my college. This situation denied my ontological values which led to cognitive dissonance which was intensified as I was responsible for wellness and organisational development. I was thus driven to embark on a values-based practitioner self-enquiry to generate a personal living theory of organisational development aimed at improving my practice and influencing other managers in the college to enable us to improve the work climate by embodying life enhancing values into our practice. This study sets out to answer my research question: How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current climate of toxicity which is experienced every day? My qualitative study is based on my paradigmatic and theoretical choices and the utilisation of appropriate methods of data generation and analysis. My theoretical choices stemmed from my epistemological, ontological and philosophical assumptions. My project was embedded in an existential, phenomenological, critical, participative research paradigm using the toxic triangle model, wellness theory, dialogic organisational development theory, chaos and complexity theories and value theory. I used visual methodologies to build relationships and promote healthy catharsis before identifying possible areas for action. Further data was generated by video journals, transcripts of action learning set meetings, my own personal reflective journal, semi-structured interviews and college artefacts such as documents and policies. My research design was rooted in action research having three cycles in the project. Cycle 1 reflects my first attempt at organisational development through a diagnostic approach to enhance the college's values. Due to its failure I learned to change my thinking and practice on organisational development and embraced dialogical organisation theory as an alternative approach to orchestrate change within an organisation. This failure led me to embrace a more cooperative and participative approach. Cycle 2 traces the selection, establishment and maintenance of an action learning set as change agents to help in data co-generation and analysis. Thematic analysis of the data generated through visual methods including the drawing of two collages and video narratives of our drawings. The following themes emerged from the data analysis namely that emotional trauma is prevalent amongst managers, that when values are violated it impacts negatively on communication, and when values are violated it leads to experiences of trauma and finally that drawing activities play a therapeutic role in dealing with trauma. The action learning set consisted of 11 members who were all mature managers and covered all gender and race

groups with an average age of 47. Cycle 3 traced the action learning set's initiatives to identify the values that were negated that had created a breeding ground for toxicity to flourish due to poor communication. In this last cycle, projects, such as poster advocacy campaigns on prioritised values was undertaken that conscientised employees. Using dialogic organisational development approaches such as Open Space Technology, two Critical Caring Conversation Café meetings were held at the corporate centre where a safe space was created for employees to address toxicity, victimisation and wellness and to change the conversation within the organisation. Coupled with the emphasis to change conversation in dialogical organisational development social media was used to drive home positive slogans. Assessment of the project was gained by the action learning set members participating in semi-structured interviews administered while they were grooming horses. My learning and that of the action learning set revealed that managers suffered emotional trauma due to toxic leaders, toxic followers and toxic environments. There was little support and the way managers coped with trauma was to suppress their emotions. After being involved in the action learning set over a period of two years managers had improved their coping skills by acknowledging and speaking openly and sharing their traumatic experiences with each other, taking responsibility for their own lives and practices, supporting one another and becoming more assertive. Based on the research findings, my personal learning and the learning gained by the action learning set members, I was able to produce my living theory of organisational development by developing a model of organisational development for use in my toxic organisation to nurture life enhancing values and improve personal and organisational wellness. I acknowledge that this model is relevant for my college now and may not be relevant for other colleges or relevant in some future time due to the ever changing context of colleges. However, the significance of this study lies firstly in the personal development of the action learning set members and secondly in their improved practice. I have improved my practice as an HRD manager and have influenced others to improve their practice and in so doing I have contributed to my own wellness and the wellness of others in the college. The broader significance of this research is that it may be of interest to other colleges facing the toxicity in the college sector as well as other education institutions.

**KEY CONCEPTS:**

Organisational Development, Toxicity, Wellness, Life Enhancing Values, Visual Methodologies, Living Theory, Action Research, TVET Colleges in South Africa.

# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>DECLARATION</b>	i
<b>DEDICATION</b>	ii
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	iii
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	iv
<b>TABLE OF CONTENT</b>	vi
<b>GLOSSARY OF TERMS</b>	x
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	xi
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b>	xii
<b>LIST OF VIDEO CLIPS</b>	xii
<b>LIST OF ANNEXURES</b>	xiii
<b>PART 1 CONCEPTUALISING THE PROJECT WITHIN ITS CONTEXT</b>	1
<b>CHAPTER 1 FRAMING MY STUDY</b>	1
1.1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.2 WHAT IS MY CONCERN?	2
1.3 WHY WAS I CONCERNED?	2
1.4 WHAT EVIDENCE CAN I OFFER TO SUPPORT MY CONCERN?	4
1.5 WHAT DID I THINK I COULD DO ABOUT IT?	7
1.5.1 Paradigmatic choices	7
1.5.2 Epistemological considerations	8
1.5.3 Ontological considerations	8
1.5.4 Theoretical framework	9
1.5.5 Methodological choices	9
1.5.6 Research design	11
1.6 HOW DID I VALIDATE MY CLAIMS?	14
1.7 HOW CAN I MODIFY MY IDEAS AND PRACTICE?	15
1.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	15
1.9 OUTLINE OF REPORT	16
1.10 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	18
1.11 POTENTIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH	18
1.12 SUMMARY	19

<b>2</b>	<b>CHAPTER 2 GROUNDING MYSELF IN ACTION RESEARCH</b>	<b>20</b>
2.1	INTRODUCTION	20
2.2	GROUNDING MYSELF AS “I” WITHIN THE RESEARCH CONTEXT	21
2.2.1	The centrality of “I” in a living theory	21
2.2.2	The “I” in relationship to others	25
2.2.3	The “I” in the process of becoming	26
2.2.4	The “I” in the organisational context	28
2.2.5	The “I” as the responsible self	29
2.2.6	The “I” as a living contradiction	31
2.3	GROUNDING MYSELF IN THE TVET CONTEXT	31
2.3.1	A brief historical overview of the TVET sector	32
2.3.2	Political influences	34
2.3.3	Economic influences	34
2.3.4	Transformation of the TVET sector post 1994	35
2.3.5	The legislative framework	35
2.3.6	Implications leading to a conducive environment for toxicity to take root	37
2.4	EXPERIENCING TOXICITY AS AN HRD MANAGER WITHIN A TVET WORKPLACE	38
2.4.1	Historical view of my career path within the college sector	38
2.4.2	Towards a provisional understanding of my context	42
2.5	SUMMARY	42
<b>3</b>	<b>CHAPTER 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY</b>	<b>43</b>
3.1	INTRODUCTION	43
3.2	ORGANISATION THEORIES AND ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT THEORIES	43
3.3	WELLNESS, WELL-BEING AND HEALTH	52
3.4	VALUES THEORY	58
3.5	TOXICITY MODEL	63
3.6	SYSTEMS THEORY	67
3.7	SUMMARY REMARKS	72
<b>4</b>	<b>CHAPTER 4 A QUESTION OF METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>73</b>
4.1	INTRODUCTION	73
4.2	THE RESEARCH QUESTION THAT GLUES EVERYTHING	74

	TOGETHER	
4.3	THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE STUDY	75
4.4	MY PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATION	75
4.5	MY RESEARCH APPROACH	77
4.6	MY RESEARCH STRATEGY: METHODOLOGY	79
4.7	RESEARCH SETTING	89
4.8	PARTICIPANTS	89
4.9	METHODS TO SUPPORT THE STRATEGY	92
4.10	CODING AND ANALYSIS	95
4.11	TRUSTING MY DATA	95
4.12	ETHICS	97
4.13	SUMMARY	98
<b>PART 2</b>	<b>CYCLES OF LEARNING AND CHANGE</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b>CHAPTER 5 MY LEARNING AS AN INSIDE RESEARCHER: GIVING ACCOUNT AS AN HRD MANAGER</b>	<b>100</b>
5.1	INTRODUCTION	100
5.2	CYCLE 1: DISRUPTING THE SYSTEM	103
5.3	CYCLE 2: ESTABLISHING, MAINTAINING AND CO-GENERATING DATA WITH THE ACTION LEARNING SET	107
5.3.1	Forming an identity	109
5.3.2	Co-generation of data through visual methods	111
5.3.3	Maintaining the action learning set	121
5.4	CYCLE 3: IDENTIFYING VALUES AND IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIES	122
5.5	MY LEARNING FROM THE VARIOUS CYCLES	124
5.6	THE IMPACT OF MY LEARNING	137
5.6.1	My personal coping strategies	139
5.7	SUMMARY	141
<b>6</b>	<b>CHAPTER 6 A CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF THE LEARNING OF THE ACTION LEARNING SET MEMBERS</b>	<b>142</b>
6.1	INTRODUCTION	142
6.2	LEARNING ABOUT ONESELF IN RELATION TO TOXICITY	144
6.3	LEARNING ABOUT TRAUMA AND STRESS: THEIR EFFECT, AND	145

	HOW THE ACTION LEARNING SET MEMBERS COPEd	
6.4	LEARNING TO IMPROVE PRACTICE IN A TOXIC ENVIRONMENT	154
6.5	COLLABORATION AND MUTUAL SUPPORT	163
6.6	ACKNOWLEDGING CHANGE WITHIN PEOPLE AND PROCESSES	165
6.7	THE LEARNING OF THE MEMBERS: ITS IMPACT, AND ITS SUSTAINABILITY	166
6.8	SUMMARY	171
<b>PART 3</b>	<b>THRIVING AT THE EDGE OF CHAOS</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>CHAPTER 7 CONCLUDING THE THESIS: REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING, CONTRIBUTIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE</b>	<b>173</b>
7.1	INTRODUCTION	173
7.2	A REFLECTIVE SUMMARY OF THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT	173
7.3	REFLECTING ON WHETHER I MET MY OBJECTIVES	175
7.4	REFLECTING ON THE VALIDITY OF THE FINDINGS	181
7.4.1	Outcome validity	181
7.4.2	Process validity	182
7.4.3	Democratic validity	183
7.4.4	Catalytic validity	183
7.4.5	Dialogic validity	184
7.5	REFLECTING ON THE LIMITATION OF THE STUDY	185
7.6	REFLECTING ON MY CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE	186
7.6.1	Expanding the approaches to methods of data generation (methodological contribution)	186
7.6.2	Understanding toxicity, its prevalence and effects on managers in the TVET College sector (theoretical contribution)	187
7.6.3	The development of a relationship model of organisational development that addresses toxicity and enhances wellness (theoretical and practical contribution)	188
7.7	REFLECTING ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MY STUDY FOR MY PRACTICE FOR OTHERS, AND THE COLLEGE SECTOR	192
7.8	REFLECTING ON THE IMPACT, SUSTAINABILITY AND FURTHER AREAS FOR RESEARCH	195
7.9	CONCLUDING REMARKS	199

## GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

	Abbreviation	Source	Usage in thesis
ANC		African National Congress.	Founded on 8 January 2012 as a social democratic liberation movement. It was unbanned in 1990 and became the ruling party in the National Government in 1994 under the presidency of Nelson Mandela.
CEO		Chief Executive Officer	Colleges of Education used the word Rector, but when merged with other Technical Colleges the principal was referred as the CEO in some colleges until clarity was established from the Further Education Training Act 16 of 2006 where they are designated as principals. I have used the word Principal to avoid confusion.
DHET		National Department of Higher Education	Universities, colleges and the Sector Education Training Authorities fall under this National ministry. Colleges migrated from the jurisdiction of Provincial Education Departments to DHET on the 1 April 2015
FET (Colleges)		Further Education and Training	The FET Act No. 98 of 1998 was enacted and the name for the merged Technical Colleges, Colleges of Education and Man Power Centres changed to FET Colleges. The name FET was replaced by TVET as per the Further Education and Training Colleges amendment Bill (B24, 2012) in 2012. I have used FET to address colleges prior to 2006 and TVET to refer to my college post 2006 so as not to cause confusion.
OD		Organisation Development and or Organisational Development	Many writers use the adjectival form organisational development. Others use the term organisation development

PED	Provincial Education Department	For the sake of continuity I have used the term organisational development. The PED had jurisdiction over the FET colleges that merged in 2002 into 50 multi-campus colleges. They relinquished control over them on 31 March 2015 when the colleges migrated from the provinces to the National DHET.
Principal	The head of the TVET Colleges	I have used Principal in place of Rector and CEO for the sake of continuity.
Rector	The head of the colleges of education	I have used the term Principal in place of Rector for the sake of continuity.
Toyi toyi	Apparently the word is of Ndebele and Shona origin, and it's postulated that the word was introduced into South Africa by ANC exiles returning from military training in Zimbabwe.	A common expression associated with strike action and civil unrest. I have used it to indicate the chanting and dancing associated with protests.
TVET (Colleges)	Technical and Vocational Education Training	The National Minister Of Higher Education announced the renaming of FET colleges to TVET. enacted in the

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>FIGURE 1.1</b>	The cyclical nature of action research (McNiff. 2003)	13
<b>FIGURE 2.1</b>	What I intended to accomplish in this chapter	21
<b>FIGURE 2.2</b>	Focus of research and the system	28
<b>FIGURE 3.1</b>	A holistic ecosystemic view of the health, wellbeing, and wellness of human beings	57
<b>FIGURE 3.2</b>	The toxic triangle model (Padilla)	67
<b>FIGURE 4.1</b>	The action research cycles undertaken in this study	88
<b>FIGURE 5.1</b>	My tipping point – my stance in making a change	104
<b>FIGURE 5.2</b>	The challenge to take action	104
<b>FIGURE 5.3</b>	The logo accepted for Curatio	110
<b>FIGURE 5.4</b>	Wellness Day activities	123
<b>FIGURE 5.5</b>	An extract from the agenda for the first staff meeting at the Corporate Centre 18 April 2016	130

<b>FIGURE 6.1:</b>	Collage 1: Negative emotional experiences	144
<b>FIGURE 6.2</b>	Equine grooming interview	146
<b>FIGURE 6.3</b>	The results of student strikes on campus	153
<b>FIGURE 6.4</b>	Scoring of values using the nominal group technique	157
<b>FIGURE 6.5</b>	Invitation that was given for the Critical Caring Conversation Café	158
<b>FIGURE 6.6</b>	Employees at the Critical Caring Conversation Café setting the agenda	159
<b>FIGURE 6.7</b>	The Principal's memo to address perceived racism	162
<b>FIGURE 6.8</b>	Values model developed by the action learning set	165
<b>FIGURE 6.9</b>	Action Learning Set participation in SWOT analysis meeting	170
<b>FIGURE 6.10</b>	The second collage: experiencing hope	172
<b>FIGURE 7.1</b>	OD relationship model for doing organisational development within a toxic workplace	189
<b>FIGURE 7.2</b>	Ladies at Cultural Day celebration displaying different cultural dresses	195
<b>FIGURE 7.3</b>	Employees wearing pink in support of breast cancer awareness day at a wellness function	195
<b>FIGURE 7.4</b>	Employees watching a video interview at a colleague who is a cancer survivor at the cancer awareness event	195
<b>FIGURE 7.5</b>	Male employees being catered for at a men's relaxation event	196

## **LIST OF TABLES**

<b>TABLE 3.1</b>	A comparison of diagnostic and dialogic OD	51
<b>TABLE 4.1</b>	The demographic profile of the action learning set	91
<b>TABLE 5.1</b>	Summary of action research cycles 2013-2015	102
<b>TABLE 5.2</b>	Summary of the first collage	114
<b>TABLE 5.3</b>	Summary of the second collage	119

## **LIST OF VIDEO CLIPS**

<b>VIDEO CLIP 5.1</b>	Start-up meeting	109
<b>VIDEO CLIP 5.2</b>	Nominal Group Technique for choice of logo	111
<b>VIDEO CLIP 5.3</b>	Collage 1	113
<b>VIDEO CLIP 5.4</b>	Prof Budd - BBC "It's only a theory"	129
<b>VIDEO CLIP 5.5</b>	Negative Emotions for unfair demands	134
<b>VIDEO CLIP 5.6</b>	Emotions under normal conditions	134
<b>VIDEO CLIP 6.1</b>	Arousal of emotions through student strikes	154

## **LIST OF ANNEXURES**

<b>ANNEXURE A</b>	Permission request to Principal	237
<b>ANNEXURE B</b>	Permission granted for research	238
<b>ANNEXURE C</b>	Participants: Informed consent	239
<b>ANNEXURE D</b>	Ethical Clearance certificate	242
<b>ANNEXURE E</b>	Language editor's letter	243
<b>ANNEXURE F</b>	Values hand out for workshop	244
<b>ANNEXURE G</b>	Presentation at Education Association of South Africa (EASE) Golden Gate 12-15 January 2013	246
<b>ANNEXURE H</b>	Possible logos submitted for Curatio	247
<b>ANNEXURE I</b>	Collage 1 drawing samples depicts negative experiences	249
<b>ANNEXURE J</b>	Collage 2 drawing samples depicts hope improved values and positive change	251
<b>ANNEXURE K</b>	Police controlling student strike action.	253
<b>ANNEXURE L</b>	Poster campaign highlighting the need to live out fully life enhancing values (posters were designed by the ALS participants)	254
<b>ANNEXURE M</b>	Critical Caring Conversation Café	259
<b>ANNEXURE N</b>	Semi Structured interview questions for staff during equine grooming exercise	260
<b>ANNEXURE O</b>	Reflection Template	261
<b>ANNEXURE P</b>	The College's vision, mission and values statement	262

# **PART 1 CONCEPTUALISING THE PROJECT WITHIN ITS CONTEXT**

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **FRAMING MY STUDY**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

This study focuses on organisational development within the context of a technical and vocational education and training (TVET) college in South Africa that falls under the national Department of Higher Education and Training. As such, it is a multifaceted study, as it brings to bear on organisational development the concepts of toxicity, wellness, life-enhancing values, and living theory. Interwoven in this self-study is my epistemological development from being an observer and a victim of toxicity, to an agent of positive change. In this backwards-and-forwards movement between theory and practice as a manager, engaging in critical reflection on what my action learning set and I were doing, I am better able to know what I know, and how I have come to know what I know. This process was more a struggle than a journey; it was not easy, due to the continual toxic environment in which I was working. However, I am grateful for this environment, not because it was toxic, but because it was a learning space (Billett, 2004; Billett & Choy, 2013) that gave rise to the development of a living theory, as an outcome of my research, which ultimately improved my practice as an HRD manager. In this study, I am claiming that as a human resource manager, I have made substantial progress in answering the question “How can I improve my practice?” (Whitehead, 1989:41, 2000:91, 2008:11), in how I have influenced others to improve their practice, and in how I have influenced the college where I work to improve its organisational wellness, by reducing its toxicity through the promotion of life-enhancing values.

My purpose in this chapter is to lay the foundations of my study; to introduce what my research entails, and to frame how I have proceeded in engaging in a self-study, using action research from the approach of a living theory, as an explanation of my learning, improved practice, and influence within the college. I adapted the process questions of enquiry that Whitehead and McNiff (2006) suggest (“What is my concern?”, “Why am I concerned?”, “What evidence supports the context?”, “What do I think I can do about it?”, “How can I be sure that my findings are reasonable?”, and “How can I modify my ideas and practice?”), as a means to guide my thinking and planning during this action research project. These questions, and my responses to them, will permeate this study. In my opinion, these questions, and the researcher’s responses to them, are fundamental for engaging in action research.

## **1.2 What is my concern?**

As a human resource development (HRD) manager, working in the head office, or “corporate centre”, of a technical and vocational education and training (TVET) college in the North West Province, of South Africa. I have concerns about service delivery and the productivity of our institution, but a far greater concern is my wellness and that of the other staff who work at this institution, and the wellness of the institution. Since the mid-1990s, the metaphor of “toxicity” has become popular in the literature to describe behaviour that has a negative effect (a) on the health and wellness of individual employees, and (b) on the institution, or organisation, itself. I concur with Maitlis (2008:1204) that organisational toxicity is “widespread, intense, energy-sapping negative emotion that disconnects people from their jobs, co-workers, and organizations [...] undermining individuals’ confidence, hope, and self-esteem, and damaging their morale and performance, both at work and outside”. My focus will be two sides of the same coin, namely the negative side of toxicity, and the positive side of healing (wellness) from this negative behaviour.

I understand toxicity as involving three elements, namely toxic leaders, toxic followers (also referred to as “susceptible followers”), and toxic environments (Frost, 2003, 2004; Goldman, 2009; Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser, 2007). Here, the term “toxic environment” does not refer to the presence of chemical toxins, but to the presence of systems and structures that support, foster, and maintain toxic relationships that have a pervasive painful effect on employees. This tripartite interaction in organisational toxicity is referred to as the “toxic triangle” (Padilla *et al.*, 2007). The concept of the toxic triangle will be the underpinning theoretical framework for this research.

## **1.3 Why was I concerned?**

Wellness of staff and institutional wellness is linked to values and ethics. By raising the components of values and ethics here, I am answering the question “Why am I concerned?” It is important to understand that wellness of staff is a growing concern internationally, as employees become aware of their rights and the obligation of employers towards their staff. Hence, globally, organisational wellness is no longer just a nice-to-have component in the organisational development basket. Although organisational wellness is not legislated in South Africa, it is one of the policies of the college where I work that drives the college (College Policy: HRD , 2011). As early as 1950, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) included “physical, mental and social well-being of workers” in their definition of occupational health (World Health Organization, 1950:3). Wellness is part of occupational health, which broadly includes safety of workers and an environment that supports employees in the workplace. In this sense, it is the ethical obligation of the institution, driven by

its values, to ensure the wellness of its staff. In this research, I have limited my study by focusing on the wellness of staff, and not on wider environmental aspects of occupational health and safety (OHS). In 1985, the ILO Occupational Health Services Convention (No. 161) stressed the need to include the physical and mental health of staff in relation to their work as areas of responsibility for employers. South Africa is a member of both the WHO and the ILO. From the literature, it would appear that Canada as a nation pays much more attention to mental health issues in the workplace than other nations do. For example, Canada has a national mental health commission, the Mental Health Commission of Canada. Gilbert and Bilsker (2012) have published guidelines for employers on the psychological health and safety of employees, which include a framework of policy, planning, promotion, prevention, and process, to address the needs of workers.

In line with global trends, South Africa is placing more emphasis on leadership and good governance. This can be seen from the first King report on corporate governance (King I) (King, 1994), which was tabled in the same year that the African National Congress (ANC) took office as the ruling party in government in South Africa. The King II (King, 2002) and King III (King, 2009) reports increased the level of what was expected of corporate behaviour, by stressing the importance of ethical leadership and corporate governance. Judge Mervyn King points out that King II requires intellectual honesty, not just compliance with the Code of Governance Principles. Hence, for King, good governance includes the values of fairness, responsibility, and transparency, on the basis of intellectual honesty (King, 2006). What I believe King is doing is to remove any emotional stance on good governance, conceptualising it instead as a reasonable, rational, ethical undertaking by organisations. According to the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) executive guide to King III, good governance in King III is essentially about effective, ethical leadership that provides direction, ethics, and values that will guide behavioural practices, in order to ensure sustainability in the organisation (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2009). While the King reports are directed at corporate enterprises, King III and the Code of Governance Principles for South Africa apply equally to all entities, both private and public (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011). Although there is recognition internationally of how the workplace impacts upon the physical and mental health of workers, the King Code in the South African context highlights the need for ethical leaders and values to be operative in the workplace. Leadership must demonstrate this ethical dimension, and King III highlights this position. Organisations are obliged to ensure ethical leadership that is values-based and directed at all stakeholders. Organisational toxicity is a violation, a denial, and a negation of values. The importance of raising awareness of this is that organisations are reluctant to initiate change, unless they are obliged to do so through legislation.

Although the King II report and code are not a legislative document, they do hold companies accountable for their behaviour towards all stakeholders. If companies were to pay attention to demands for ethical leadership, there would possibly be an improved workplace environment, with a reduced degree of organisational toxicity, which would lead to wellness in the workplace.

Organisational toxicity, the acceptance of toxic behaviours in the organisation (Bacal, 2000), can be mitigated by having a conducive organisational culture (Aubrey, 2012). Organisational toxicity is evident where ethics and values are not honoured, where there is no monitoring system to alert to, identify, and address toxic behaviours (Tavanti, 2011), and where there is no training on wellness issues, or no policies or strategies (Meyer, 2011) in place to regulate inappropriate behaviour. Toxicity in an organisation is also evident when staff are not mindful (Carroll, 2007) of the negative impact that toxic behaviour has on colleagues. Toxicity has its source in toxic leaders, and/or in toxic followers, and/or in toxic organisational structures.

The stated key values of the college where I work are accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, quality, redress of educational opportunities, accessibility, and sustainable development. I do not see much of these values being lived out in the college. I am striving to instil the values that I hold dear, such as transparency, honesty, respect, compassion, caring, inclusivity, justice, and professionalism.

In organisational development, it is important that the values of the organisation and the values of the individual are congruent. When there is a lack of fit between the values of the organisation and those of the individual, there is an increase in job burnout among individuals, and a decrease in work engagement and productivity (Dyląg, Jaworek, Karwowski, Kożusznik & Marek, 2013). When there is alignment between the values of the organisation and the values of the individual, there is a higher level of job satisfaction. Correspondence of values, personal and organisational, may be perceived by some employees as more important than the pay package that they receive (Gorenak & Kosir, 2012). A lack of alignment of personal and professional values negatively impacts on staff well-being. This creates space for toxic leaders to operate, and for toxic followers to follow, thereby propping up the system that allows structures to exist that give rise to toxic organisations.

**1.4 What evidence can I offer to support my concern?** As an HRD manager who has had to buffer toxic emotions between management and staff, I have become a 'toxic handler', a manager who shoulders all the emotional baggage, bitterness, frustration, and anger that flows between staff and management (Frost & Robinson, 1998; Frost, 2006; Gallos, 2008). Toxic handlers are at risk of their own health deteriorating, as the effect of being the buffer and

conduit for the flow of negative energy and emotions is that the immune system becomes compromised (Bierema, 2012). (I have experienced this personally, in that I suffered chest pains while being caught between senior management and union members working in my division, who were involved in disputes with each other). There has been a proliferation of articles, books, and research on toxicity as a human resource issue in the past 15 years (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007; Burke & Cooper, 2013; Chapman, 2009; Kimlinger, Mines, Kent, Hull, Hiester & Moore, 2011), and there is a strong link between experiences of toxicity and a lack of values being lived out in the workplace (Kusy & Holloway, 2009).

Apart from my own personal experience of toxicity alluded to above, do I have other experiences within the college that can attest to my ontological values being negated, suppressed, or violated? A further example to illustrate toxicity in the workplace can be drawn from my own experience in the institution. The corporate services manager (CSM) was fired, after he was accused of engaging in racist practices, among other things. After he appealed, he was reinstated, but hindered from returning to work by union interventions, even though he was cleared of all charges, due to lack of evidence. However, he has since returned to work, after five-and-a-half years of staying at home on full pay. The facts pertaining to his case were withheld from staff, leading to speculation and gossip. An indication of the impact that this stress was having on me, as the “toxic handler”, was that my chest pains disappeared within two months after this manager was removed, as I was sandwiched between him and the union representatives who worked in my department, and he was my immediate superior. My values of justice, transparency, and honesty were denied while I was playing the role of toxic handler.

Another example of toxicity in the workplace was where one manager, in front of all the staff, was told by the Principal that he was an unhappy employee and a “grumpy person”, which led to an emotionally charged confrontation between the two in front of subordinates. The result was emotional stress, as staff have now split into two camps, based on which of the two parties they sided with. The morning meeting where these things were said was boycotted by the manager in question, which led to others joining him in solidarity, where they held a separate meeting downstairs a week later. While others returned, the manager in question remained away for over a month, without anything being done about it. In addition, two female managers resorted to violence, and physically fought in front of junior staff members over a booking of a vehicle, and no disciplinary action was taken. My values of acting responsibly and professionally, and of showing respect and dignity, were denied as colleagues were humiliated in this way before other staff, and nothing was done about it. I did not see the college senior management acting in line with its own policies, or acting ethically towards its staff.

Another source of stress in the college is the fact that the college staff were transferred (migrated) to the national Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) from the college council and the provincial Department of Education as employer, but not all were accommodated. There was a lack of communication to staff regarding the processes being followed, which left staff with job uncertainty and stress. The psychological effects of mergers have been researched in TVET colleges, and the research has shown the negative effects that mergers have on staff well-being (De Wet, 2008). The situation with regard to the migration process is that rumours have spread that some top managers of the Senior Management Team (SMT) has been accused of meeting with some union members privately concerning the transfer of staff to the DHET, which created unnecessary anxiety among individual staff members over whether they would be retained, whether they would be left as college council members, or whether they would be placed on excess, based on the alliances they have formed with important role players (in this case, either management or the unions). Finally, the human resource (HR) manager requested a transfer to another department, due to stress. She was given a letter of transfer, only to have it withdrawn a week later. She has subsequently resigned and moved to another TVET college. Top managers would appear to have little regard, intentionally or unintentionally, for the emotions of staff members, without considering the impact that this has on the health of their staff.

From the above examples, it is evident that organisational toxicity has existed in the college for an extended period of at least eight years, experienced from the time of the first staff strikes in 2008, which led to the dismissal of one of the top managers. In addition, the number of labour relations cases relating to issues of unfair labour practice that have been taken to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) has risen from one a year to more than four per year. More examples of values being denied is that one of the top managers was so angry that he swore at one of the HR practitioners over the telephone, leading to a strike by staff. Research into the TVET sector is scant, but Meyer (2011) highlighted the impact that psychological violence was having at the college where I work.

The rationale for undertaking this research is based not only on previous research and my observations in my professional role, but also on my own awareness of what toxicity is doing to my own health. Meyer's (2011) research highlighted the toxic climate in this college. From the personal examples given above, and from what has been reported to me, the conclusion is that the corporate centre where I work has toxic leaders, toxic followers, and a toxic environment, which impacts negatively on the wellness of staff.

## **1.5 What did I think I could I do about it?**

Healing is not the absence of toxicity; it goes beyond that. Burke and Cooper (2013:105) speak of moving away from toxicity to a fulfilling workplace, where social capital plays a positive role, by contributing to individual well-being and development, as well as to “effective organizational functioning”. By the term ‘social capital’, I am referring to the network of relationships built on trust, norms, and values, which have a productive outcome (Adam & Rončević, 2003). Organisational healing is the repairing and mending of the organisation’s social fabric, through compassion, mutual support, faith, and courage (Powley & Cameron, 2006). In this study, I was seeking to take action, to produce a more positive, inspired, healthy staff and organisation, through the embodiment of life-enhancing values.

It has been established by Meyer that wellness of staff in the TVET college where I work includes physical, spiritual and mental aspects (Meyer, 2011). At the heart of toxicity is pain. The concept of toxicity in the workplace has taken on different nuances in the literature, such as toxic emotions (Frost, 2003; Glasø & Vie, 2010), toxic leaders/leadership (Aubrey, 2012; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Whicker, 1996), and toxic trenches (Gallos, 2008). Toxicity exists in the workplace when it stems from either toxic leaders (destructive leadership), toxic followers (susceptible followers), or toxicity in the organisation itself (that is, conducive environments), or a combination of these elements (Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser, 2007). Kelley (2008), however, stresses that susceptible followers are found at all levels of the organisation, and that they often support toxic leaders, in so doing contributing to the creation of a dysfunctional organisation. When there is an abuse of power by toxic leaders, this negative energy gives rise to deliberate actions of aggression and hostility. Being at the receiving end of this abuse, subordinates retaliate, since they seek justice and fairness in the workplace, not an abuse of power. I have observed at the corporate centre where I work that when toxic energy flows back and forth between toxic leaders and toxic followers, the workplace is in a perpetual state of toxicity, marked by mistrust, backbiting, and gossip

I decided to do an action research self-study, to improve my own practice and influence other by promoting the embodiment of life-enhancing values in the workplace. The following paragraphs explain the action research process followed, starting with my paradigmatic choices.

### **1.5.1 Paradigmatic choices**

As a set of beliefs, a paradigm (Kuhn, 1996) becomes a set of lenses (Stock, Phillips & Vincs, 2009) through which I understand myself, the organisation, the staff, and the world better. The clearer my paradigm, the easier it is to explain and trace my epistemological development. Hence, I approach my study from a participatory approach within the overarching paradigm of

post-positivism. In accordance with recommendations made by Wisker (2007), I have chosen to use small samples, I generate theory, and I do not generalise, or transfer, learning from one setting to another, as each context is different. One principle that I hold dear for myself and others is that the one thing humans cannot do is not learn. It is an inevitable part of the brain's function. Thus, lifelong learning is a function of being human, and flowing out of this way of thinking is hope, hope that we can make a better world, a better college, irrespective of how old or young our staff may be, or what positions they hold, or the experience they may have. An inclusive approach, where staff are able to have the space to participate and to dialogue through critical robust discussions, becomes paramount in organisational development. My living theory is a critical reflection, a self-learning activity, and an explanation gained from a life spent working as an HRD manager.

### ***1.5.2 Epistemological considerations***

I maintain that my research finds its epistemological basis in what McNiff (2013a) refers to as dialectical, relational and dialogical forms of logic. Dialogical logic as a way of knowing is rooted in the idea that “we are always in relationship to other people, and see the relationship as forms of coming to know” (McNiff, 2013a). Dialectical reasoning is rooted in the Hegelian model of thesis-antithesis-synthesis (Wheat, 2012), where conflicting views are merged to form a new way of doing things, until another way is found, and then another, and so on. Relational thinking in my understanding, is the opening of space in a dialogical way, that allows for dialectical reasoning, but within the parameters that no one holds perfect truth, and in the relationship of “I” and “thou” (Buber, 2010). With respect and love, new epistemologies can be generated that will enhance both practice and understanding in the organisation. In this way, my influence in the “I-thou” relationship is evident. This relates to my living theory, in that I seek to influence myself and colleagues to improve practice, so that healing can take place in the college.

### ***1.5.3 Ontological considerations***

This research is about me, and what I can do to improve my practice as an HRD manager, so as to influence the practice of others and the organisation. My ontology is based on the values of respect, caring, inclusivity, accountability, and participation. In my opinion, these values are at the heart of organisational development. Organisations are developed when staff are accountable for what they do in the workplace and how they relate to their colleagues and the organisation, in a positive, productive way, driven by shared values. The corporate centre staff and I are not discrete objects that can be isolated in test tubes and studied.

#### **1.5.4 Theoretical framework**

My understanding and point of departure for organisation theory is that institutions such as the college are complex systems, but they are stuck in functionalist bureaucratic paradigms of public institutions. Van Tonder (2004) stresses that contemporary theorists speak of organisations as “neural” networks that create meaning, have interconnectedness, and are interdependent, where there is a natural flow of information. I align myself with this thinking and link it to complexity theory within a systems theory approach. By complexity theory, I imply non-deterministic outcomes of an organisation, which can expand and be responsive to the changes that take place within the organisation and within society, but are not predictable. I have also been influenced by the psychological paradigm of organisational development, as this paradigm addresses the shortcoming of organisation theory of not addressing emotions in the workplace (Van Tonder, 2004). I will also draw on Tesch’s (1992: 142-145) eight step guide for coding unstructured data in qualitative research.

I will use the toxic triangle model (Padilla *et al.*, 2007) to structure my research. In my assessment, this model is useful, as it indicates relationships between the organisational structures of power, destructive leaders, and susceptible, vulnerable followers, who either succumb to the tyranny of toxic leaders or support, or prop up, the leaders, thereby perpetuating the toxic system, by becoming toxic followers. More discussion on theories used and how they influenced my study are contained in the following chapters.

#### **1.5.5 Methodological choices**

Working from within the participatory paradigm, I use action research methodology. Action research is traced back by most scholars to the 1940s. Kurt Lewin (1946) is seen as the father of the movement, who used action research in the same context that I am using it, namely as a means of achieving organisational development. I use a practitioner self-enquiry (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) form of action research, with the specific aim of generating a living theory of organisational development. A living theory is defined by Whitehead (2008:104) as “an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work”. I have chosen action research, as this research methodology is well suited to the context of business organisations (McNiff & Whitehead, 2000; Wisker, 2007). Action research is undertaken when a problem is identified in a specific context, and the intention is not just to understand the problem, but to transform practice, which “leads to empowerment” (Waddington, 1996:166). Hence, action research cannot be generalised; it is context-specific. The context is where theory and practice come together in a dynamic way, so that due to this dynamic relationship, change is wrought, knowledge is created, and learning takes place. This integration dynamic of theory

and practice is referred to as “praxis”. I like the way Zuber-Skerritt (2009:113) defines praxis, namely as “the interdependence and integration – not separation – of theory and practice, research and development, thought and action [...] a dialectical relationship”.

My methodological choices have also been influenced by the research method of action inquiry, as described by Torbert and Taylor (2013), where action inquiry is seen as a timely action that is performed simultaneously looking at the past, the present, and the future, by researching oneself (first-person action inquirer), one’s relations with others (second person), and the organisation (third person). It fits in with what I am doing as an HRD manager, who is researching my own practice (first person), interactions with and between colleagues (second person), and the organisation as a system (third person). I like Torbert and Taylor’s approach of linking personal development with organisational development in a creative way. In the organisational literature, the use of self as a catalyst is evident as being at the core of organisational development (Smith & Rogers, 2012), as it links self-awareness, perceptions, what we do, and the choices that we make with our capacity to bring about organisational change. I devote more attention in chapter 2 to explaining the significance of “I” in a living theory approach.

My living theory as an outcome of action research enquiry highlights the “unequivocal legitimation of ‘I’ as a central element of practitioners’ living theory of practice” (McNiff, 2007:1). I follow an eclectic approach, of incorporating postmodern, participatory and constructivist world views (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). I believe truth to be a “slippery” concept (O’Leary, 2009:5), that is, it is always contextual, political, and permeated with values. It is not only the researcher who has choices, values, and influences, but also the other participants in the research process, as they each have their own personal choices of values, likes, and dislikes. Together we co-generate knowledge in dialogical interaction, grounded in praxis. I integrate my behaviour, values, actions, thoughts, and feelings into the research as I research the “I” in relation to the other participants, namely my colleagues in the workplace. How I do this is through a process of continual critical self-reflection and learning, in collaboration with colleagues in the workplace.

The approach followed in this research to generate knowledge is inductive reasoning, as opposed to deductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning (Read, 2014) starts from the bottom up, from observations, and generates a theory, based on the phenomena that have been observed. Deductive reasoning, by contrast, works on proving hypotheses, that is, “If a, then b”. Inductive reasoning makes generalisations on the basis of observation of a particular phenomenon. In this study, I undertake a qualitative enquiry influenced by my participatory paradigm, looking at

relationships and my own values and attitudes, as well as those of staff at the corporate centre, with regard to organisational toxicity as experienced in the college.

### **1.5.6 Research design**

In the research design plan I have included the location, participants and methods of data generation and analysis pertaining to my research which I now briefly address.

- **Research site, and participant recruitment**

The college where I conduct my research is one of three colleges in North West Province, and one of 50 public TVET colleges in South Africa. The college has a number of campuses, in a radius of 290 km. The head office, known as the corporate centre, is situated in one of the mining centres of the province, and is the hub for the campuses. Four former technical colleges and a college of education, where I served for 17 years as lecturer, head of department, vice-rector, and rector, merged in 2002, to form the current TVET college where I work. The college offers various programmes, such as a National Certificate Vocational (NCV) in the field of business studies, and in engineering studies (2,083 combined NCV students). Another programme is referred to by industry as National Training and Education (NATED) programme for business and engineering (5,930 students altogether). In addition there are learnerships, and skills courses supported by industry. Artisan training is also offered at our campus which is a registered trade centre. 886 students are enrolled in the artisan, learnership and skills programmes. A total student body of 8,899 was registered in 2013, served by 355 full-time staff, made up of academic and support staff. Classes are offered from 7:30 until 19:00 on most campuses, and some classes also take place on Saturdays between 8:00 and 16:00.

For the purposes of this study I selected the corporate centre as the site of my action research. The corporate centre houses 55 staff members, including the principal, two deputies, and the chief financial officer (CFO). There are 21 managers and 39 support staff. The reason for this selection is twofold, namely that I am engaging in action research in order to generate a living theory of organisational development, and I work at the corporate centre as a manager. Hence, it is in line with my research question, namely “How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current toxicity which is experienced every day?”

Recruiting participants requires an understanding of size, strategy, and sampling techniques, and it is acceptable to utilise more than one sampling method (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). I chose to use convenience sampling, as it has the benefits of reducing travel time and costs, and addressing the availability of participants, even though it is one of the least rigorous sampling techniques. In addition, I utilise purposeful sampling to select a cohort of managers

who have experienced toxicity as a debilitating phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). I align myself with Neuman (2000), who indicates that purposeful sampling is appropriate in cases where in-depth investigation is needed, so as to generate rich qualitative data. My choice of sampling technique is based on the consideration that purposeful sampling is suited to a small numbers of participants. The purposefully selected sample was drawn from the cohort of managers at the corporate centre, as well as the campus managers who attend all meetings at the corporate centre, and who report directly to the principal at the corporate centre.

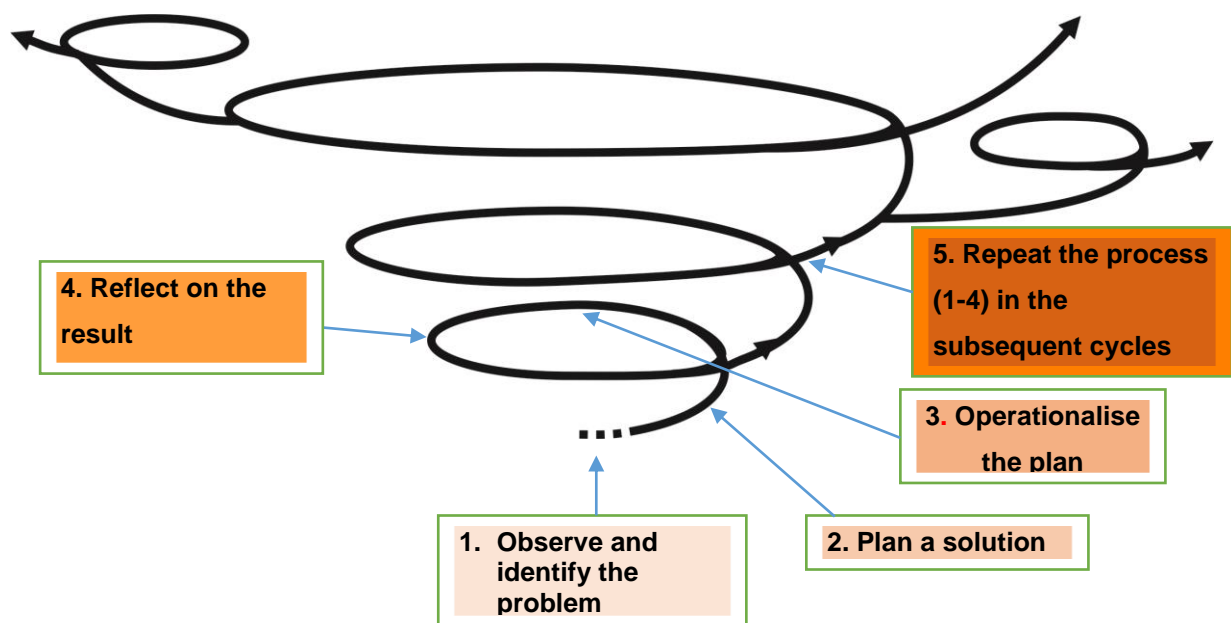
From the above key informants, who are experts in their respective fields of management, I formed an action learning set (ALS) consisting of six campus managers and six managers from the corporate centre. This learning set was later reduced to four campus managers and four managers at the corporate centre, due to resignations and changes in positions within the organisation. The reason for this choice was determined by my action research approach to answering the question “How can I, as the HRD manager, contribute to and influence the creation of a healthier climate in the corporate centre of this TVET college?” It is obvious that I can influence those with whom I work, and they are managers, who can, in turn, influence others. These managers have the responsibilities of policy development and oversight of staff, and they have decision-making power. I was well aware that as I am engaging in action research, which, by its very nature, is participative, even though I am developing a living theory, I would also be influenced by what the participants contribute to the research design in and during the research cycles.

- **Data generation and analysis**

Data generation refers to the method by which data is collected. In keeping with my participatory methodology, I engage my participants in the action learning set, along with myself, to generate and become involved in the process of data analysis, so that I, as research practitioner, facilitate most of the process (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). In working in a participative and interactive manner with the participants in the research, my interventions, in themselves, generated valuable data. I now explain some of the strategies that helped to facilitate participation within the ALS, while generating rich data to analyse. This chapter just provides an overview of the strategies used; they will be discussed in more depth at the appropriate place in following chapters.

Action research does not assume that after a set number of cycles, learning will stop, or that the end will be perfect and complete. The opposite is true, namely that action research always opens up new prospects, new knowledge, and partially new truths. Put differently, there is never a final word to action research. Figure 1.1 below (McNiff, 2013a) indicates how, in an action

cycle, there may be smaller research cycles, which become action research activities all on their own, during the course of finding a solution to the main problem, which was identified first. Action research can be seen as a messy business, as things often do not go according to plan in this type of research, and as the researcher, I must be prepared for unforeseen events.



**Figure 1.1: Adapted from the cyclical nature of action research (McNiff, 2009:3)**

- **Group drawing and narratives:**

Managers had the opportunity to express their negative traumatic experiences of a participatory activity or event on a timeline, where the time period from 2009 to 2014 was represented spatially as a flowing river. The drawing was done on a 6m<sup>2</sup> piece of calico, using coloured crayons. A multimedia video camera was used to capture the drawing and the managers' shared narrative of what was drawn. The multimedia video narrative data was analysed in terms of themes, occurrences, and displays of emotion through body language. I used a second collage, done in the same way, but highlighting the positive aspects of what we as an ALS would like to see happen in the college from March to August 2015, as short-term goals. Managers again narrated what they had drawn, and the video recordings were transcribed for analysis by the group. The choice of using visuals is based on the fact that pictures are useful for eliciting emotions for data generation (Theron, Mitchell, Smith & Stuart, 2011).

- **Semi-structured interviews:**

In order to deepen the emotional feedback, four members of the ALS voluntarily participated in grooming horses, while being questioned on their drawing. Their participation in grooming horses facilitates free association. The rationale behind this is based in psychoanalytic psychotherapy where the conscious mind is selective in what it is prepared to divulge, but the unconscious mind, which forgets nothing, is able to divulge a lot more..

- **Reflective journals:**

In addition, I used my reflective journal to ensure that the “I” in the enquiry is not lost. Some members of the ALS also submitted video reflections of the activities and events that they had encountered in the research process as they reflected on their participation and learning. The video content was analysed (Struwig & Stead, 2001), and was, likewise, transcribed for later analysis.

- **Document analysis:**

I used a hermeneutical approach (Parsons, Hewson, Adrian & Day, 2013) when I read the documents available to me from the college, such as minutes, reports, and written demands from unions and students, in order to get to the intent lying behind the text. Much of my understanding of the art and science of hermeneutics has been influenced by the hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur & Savage, 1970), which I bring to bear on understanding the documents and posters that I analysed for data generation.

## **1.6 How did I validate my claims?**

Validity and trustworthiness are concepts associated with traditional forms of enquiry; however, neither concept is adequate for action research (Herr & Anderson, 2015, 2005). The reason for this is that validity and trustworthiness do not take into account the action outcomes in action research, but instead, merely focus on the knowledge that is generated in the research process. In spite of this, Herr and Anderson (2015, 2005) maintain that in order to speak about the credibility, quality, and workability of action research, it is feasible to retain the concept of validity of the research with qualification, rather than to “coin a new term” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, 2005:49). I employed “process validity, outcome validity, democratic validity, dialogic validity and catalytic validity” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, 2005:54), as the living theory was developed in a participatory way, and these categories I could align with my ontological values, which are my standards of judgement.

To judge the validity of my report, I relied on the four validity claims of Habermas’ (1984) and Habermas and McCarthy, 1987) communication action competencies, namely (a) “Is the report

comprehensible?”, (b) “Is it true/accurate?”, (c) “Is it truthfully stated?”, and (d) “Is it morally appropriate and right?” My report must be readable to the majority of staff at the college’s corporate centre, and it must open up communication spaces for further discussion. Furthermore, it must be verified in terms of accuracy, both in its presentation and its content, by peers, fellow managers, and critical friends. The intent must be ethical, as I want to bring healing to the workplace. The outcome, namely the improvement of my practice, and the influencing of the practice of others and that of the organisation, through development of my living theory of organisational development, is inherently ethical, in that the organisational climate will become healthier, and the staff will benefit from such a state of affairs.

Validation in generating a living theory is also grounded in my own values as a researcher-practitioner. As such, I have taken responsibility for the knowledge that I generate and the influence that I may have had on others, as I offer an explanation of my learning by developing a dynamic epistemology that relates to educational knowledge and improved praxis (Whitehead, 2011) – a living theory of my practice as an HRD manager engaged in organisational development. The knowledge generated, while emerging from the dialectic relationships between myself and others within the organisational context, must be juxtaposed with who I am, my ontology. My stated values (those of responsibility, inclusivity, professionalism, transparency, respect, compassion, and altruism) will become the “living standards of judgement” (Whitehead, 1989:42) against which I evaluate my actions and the research process.

### **1.7 How can I modify my ideas and practice?”**

The whole purpose of engaging in action research in order to generate a living theory of organisational development was to influence my learning and improve my practice while simultaneously influencing other managers to improve their learning and practice, thereby improving the wellness in the organisation. There was a noticeable change in my approach to engaging in organisational development as I moved from a diagnostic approach to a dialogic approach. The coping strategies on how managers handled their stress from the toxicity within the college changed and they took responsibility for their own wellness. These positive changes are discussed in chapters 5-7.

### **1.8 Ethical considerations**

I am a member of the South African Council of Educators (SACE), and am bound by their ethical requirements. Consent to undertake this research was granted by the principal of the college. Babbie and Mouton (2010) make the point that a researcher has an ethical responsibility to their sponsor. The findings of this research will be made available to the

principal and the college council, as part of my ethical responsibility. The study adheres to the requirements of North-West University's Research Ethics Committee. As part of the ethical obligations of my research, I have taken into consideration the well-being of my participants, and have treated them with respect and dignity. In accordance with recommendations made by Flick (2011) and O'Leary (2009) concerning ethical considerations, I sought their voluntary participation, without any coercion or favour. In addition, participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage during the research process, should they so wish.

Informed consent (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Davies, 2008; Struwig & Stead, 2001; Zeni, 1998) was sought from all participants. The consent forms included a section which provided information about the use of audio-visual recordings, as video footage was used in the collection of data. All information gathered was treated with the utmost confidentiality, and anonymity was ensured, as no names were used in the research. I avoided using titles that could reveal the identity of the individuals. Where necessary, I used pseudonyms, to protect the anonymity of participants.

Dealing with conflicts and emotions can, in itself, be energy-sapping (Leiter, 2012). I therefore looked after my own well-being and sought help from my supervisor, who is a registered social worker. In the process of the research, I arranged for counselling services from a registered qualified social worker employed at the college for any participants who may have needed them, and participants were informed of the availability of these services.

## **1.9 Outline of report**

### ***Part 1: Conceptualising the project within its context***

#### **Chapter 1 Framing my study**

This chapter introduces my study to the reader, where I clarify what my concern is, why I am concerned, what I can do about my concern, what evidence there is from the context to support my concern, and how I can validate my epistemological claims to knowledge and the improvement of practice.

#### **Chapter 2 Grounding myself in action research**

In this chapter, I foreground myself as the significant "I" in the research context. This chapter also gives me the opportunity to ground myself in the context of the TVET sector, by explaining the challenges and status of the TVET sector as they stand currently, including the historical

and political context that has shaped and contributed to the current organisational climate. Finally, I ground myself in my workplace as an HR manager.

### **Chapter 3 Theoretical framework for the study**

The theories relating to organisational development, wellness, values, and action research dominate the discussion in this chapter. In my discussion, I explain which theories I chose to use, giving reasons for my choices, and I demonstrate how these theories correspond with my epistemological and ontological values.

### **Chapter 4 A question of methodology.**

I will explore my choice of research methodology in this chapter. I explicate my paradigmatic choices, and how my personal values shaped my epistemological and ontological stances. In this chapter, I deal deeply with the research methods, data generation, analysis, validation, and ethical considerations that I utilised in my action research design, I indicate my choices in the selection of my participants, and the reasons for choosing the corporate centre as my research site. I also give an account of how I established an action learning set to generate data. I further explain how the data was analysed and used in the study.

### ***Part 2: Cycles of learning and change***

### **Chapter 5 My learning as an inside researcher: giving account as an HRD Manager.**

This chapter details with my learning during the research cycles, as a means of answering the question; “How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current toxicity which is experienced every day?”. The problem at hand requires that interventions take place that involve planning, acting, generating data, and reflecting.

### **Chapter 6 Critical discussions of the learning of the action learning set**

In this chapter only cycle 2 and 3 are focused on as I offer insights into the learning of the members of the action learning set. In this chapter their learning is directed at; what did they learn about themselves and their practice?, what coping strategies assisted them to deal with their own wellness?, what did they learn about the research process? And how did they influence others to improve their wellness in a toxic workplace? Cycle 3 focused on their involvement in projects of advocacy, the use of social media to change conversations and Critical Caring Conversation Café meetings. I also report on their personal reflections on what they had learned about their coping mechanism dealing with trauma, how they had changed, what were the changes in their own lives and the lives of others that could validate that

organisational development had taken place and that there was a reduction in toxicity through personal and corporate and values being lived out in the work place.

### ***PART 3: Thriving at the edge of chaos***

#### **Chapter 7 Concluding the thesis: reflections on learning, contributions and significance.**

In this chapter, I offer a personal reflection on my study, my learning and the learning of the managers in the action learning set. I focus on whether I met my objectives, critique the validity of the findings, raise the limitation of the study, of my contribution to knowledge through a model of organisational development for a toxic college, raise the significance, impact and sustainability of the research and highlight what areas of research still needs further investigation. I encourage debate, learning, and possible understandings that can be drawn from the research, so that others can learn from my living theory, by making it public and open for discussion and validation. In the type of action research project that I use in this study, where there is a participatory approach, it cannot be predicted how or what will be the specific end results, other than to say that there will be change in me, in my colleagues, and in the organisation, which will help to reduce the toxicity in the organisation. In summary I reflect in this last chapter on whether as an HRD manager did I contributed to the wellness in the college in which this research was conducted, by answering the question “How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current toxicity which is experienced every day?”.

#### **1.10 Limitations of the study**

A limitation of this research is that it focuses only on staff at the corporate centre of the college where I work, and the action set is sourced only from managers. This research focuses on only one of 50 colleges in South Africa, and hence, the college sector as a whole is not addressed. However, based on discussions that I have had with colleagues from other colleges, it would seem that toxicity is a common phenomenon in many colleges in the higher education sector.

#### **1.11 Potential significance of the research**

It is assumed that toxicity in the workplace, feelings of dissonance (Festinger, 1957), emotionally and cognitively, stress, feelings of hurt, and the phenomenon where an organisation is not values-driven are not limited to this particular TVET college in the higher education sector. The higher the level of toxicity, the more likely the organisation will be dysfunctional. Toxicity cannot be totally eradicated (Goldman, 2009). Against this background, I believe that by generating my living theory, I will not only change what I am doing (my praxis) as an HRD manager in the organisation where I work, but I will also influence others to reflect on their own

praxis at my employing TVET college. My account can be used to understand the impact of toxicity on staff, and how, in a participatory way, healing can be achieved, by reducing the toxicity through life-enhancing values. Within the TVET sector, my findings may influence HRD practices in the other 49 TVET colleges as a best-practice model – in fact, the only model, as no other research has been done in this field. My claim is that the knowledge generated in collaboration with others in this study will contribute not only to organisational development in TVET colleges in general, but also to the wellness of staff in particular.

While it is important to bring about systemic changes to the organisational development (OD) praxis, it is even more essential to bring healing, to myself and colleagues. It is often said that people are the most important asset in an organisation. These assets need to be looked after in terms of their own wellness. This research project will raise the level of awareness of toxicity among TVET college staff and the national Department of Higher Education and Training, and the impact that toxicity has on what employees, including me, experience. Through the collaborative and participatory approach of action research, employees will be empowered to take responsible action for their own health, through ownership, and by living out values that reduce toxicity, thereby bringing about transformational change within the organisation. The significance of this research is that it is relevant not only in the South African TVET context but in all other institutions and organisations wherever situated that is experiencing toxicity. The reason for this is that this research highlights the need to foreground people which in turn will lead to a healthier organisational climate where employees take responsibility for their own wellness,

### **1.12 Summary**

This chapter serves as an introduction to my study. It acts as a site map for navigating through the various chapters. The content allows the reader to get a handle on what, where and how I undertook this action research project and lays the foundation for understanding the remaining chapters in this thesis. In the next chapter I highlight the contextual factors of my research by grounding myself as an inside researcher in the college TVET sector. I will spend some time dealing with the concept of “I” in the research process as I have focused on a self-study in order to generate a living theory of organisational development.

## CHAPTER 2

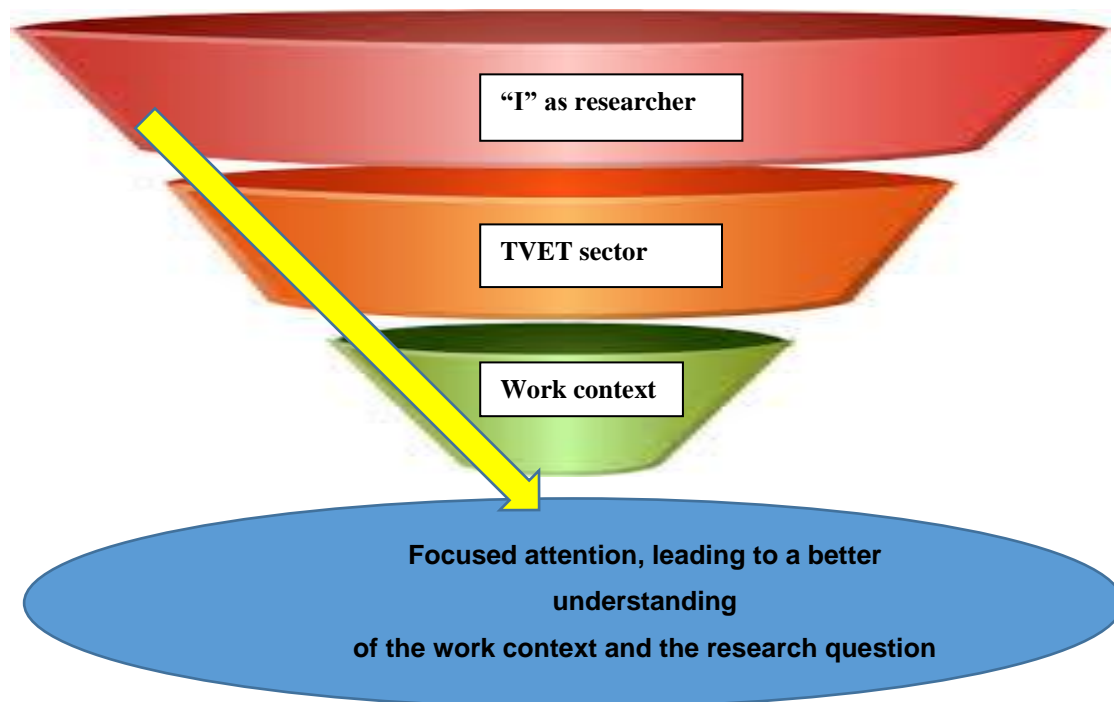
### GROUNDING MYSELF IN ACTION RESEARCH

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter positions me as an action researcher working within my own organisation, bearing in mind the primary research question of my study, namely “How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current toxicity which is experienced every day?”. In order to accomplish this, I start by taking a collaborative position within the ambit of action research. I commit myself in this research to using a collaborative and participatory paradigm, which underlines the fact that at an epistemological level, the researcher is not claiming to be an expert, possessing all knowledge and skills, but rather is relying on social construction of knowledge from within the contributions of the participants in the research. Thus, the significance of the research, when using a participatory approach, shifts from the researcher to the participants, where they themselves become actively involved in the research process.

I believe that this shift is a natural reaction by qualitative researchers to positivism’s emphasis on the so-called “neutrality” of the researcher, where they are assumed to be an expert in the field, who is able to bracket out their values, feelings, and assumptions. I fully agree with a qualitative approach that counters this position that elevates the researcher to the status of an expert doing research, not with people, but on people. I want to ensure that the role and position of the researcher maintains their rightful place within the research process, not from an epistemological position, but from a pragmatic logical position. By this, I mean that no research would be undertaken if there was no researcher. As such, any research starts with the researcher, and ends with the researcher, who must be accountable for the research process, as well as for public dissemination of the findings. Validation of the research is not the responsibility of the participants, but that of the researcher. I believe that this position is extremely important when doing research in your own organisation. I do not cease to be an HRD manager with no knowledge of organisational development, staff wellness, and leadership styles or change management. Working with the participants in my action learning set, I may have more skills and knowledge based on personal studies and experience; hence, as an action researcher, I do not bracket out who and what I am and become an objective neutral figure, as would be the case if I were a positivist researcher. In fact, action research acknowledges the fact that researchers are value-laden and morally committed (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011).

Due to the position I have taken, I start with the researcher – myself – the subjective “I” in research. I then drill down into the sector in which I work, namely the TVET sector, and finally I drill down into the college where I work, in order to understand and articulate the context of my research. By drilling down through these layers, I become more focused, and am able to better articulate an understanding of the research context, which will, in turn, cause my living theory of organisational development to be given direction by my research question. Figure 2.1 is a visual representation of what I intend to accomplish in this chapter.



**Figure 2.1: What I intend to accomplish in this chapter**

## **2.2 Grounding myself as 'I' within the research context**

In order to deepen my understanding of the research context, and to articulate how a living theory can be an outcome of my action research, I focus in this section on the significance of the researcher. In order to make my understanding of the researcher clear, I highlight six 'I' elements that are relevant to me as an action researcher within my own organisation.

### **2.2.1 The centrality of the 'I' in a living theory**

Working from a postmodern paradigm, which rejects the positivistic approach that separates (or brackets out) the researcher from the researched, I acknowledge and celebrate my own subjectivity. I am an existential being that is influenced by and influences others in the process of living. I am fully involved in the research project as an HRD manager and a researcher, and I

must take my context, and personal values, and learning into account. Action research runs on two axes, namely that of action (praxis), to change an identified problem that is important enough to warrant time, effort, and commitment, and that of the rigorous research processes and methods that underpin scientific research. The envisaged outcome of such engagement is change through learning. When the 'I' is placed at the heart of the enquiry, the explanation as an output of this twofold process in action research, namely change and learning, when answering the question; "How do I improve my practice?" constitutes a living educational theory (Whitehead, 1989). It is precisely because I am both a participant and a reflective researcher in the same process that I locate myself centrally in the research process of generating a living theory. This locus of proximity, being a participant and a reflective practitioner within the organisation, highlights the uniqueness in being an inside researcher. I coin the term 'locus of proximity' to indicate that the 'locus' for me is my workplace, i.e. the college, within a particular department, with a particular HR focus. The term 'proximity' stresses the relationships with fellow colleagues within the organisation, which are defined by space and time. Thus, in this context, I am both the subject of research, undertaking research in collaboration with others, and the object of research, open to undergoing change in my own praxis at the same time. Therefore, I am grounded as the 'I' in the research process.

I am aware that McNiff (2008) has indicated that recently there is a trend among researchers, that while doing first-person action research, they have replaced the 'I' with 'me', so that the narrative is all about "me", and hence she warns against making "I" the centrality of enquiry. I completely agree with her, but I wish to stress that I am using centrality not as a hub around which all other things rotate, where these other things would be less important; what I mean by centrality is that within the perimeter of the circle, as the researcher, I am in relationship to all others as equals, where I am 'equidistant', as it were, from all the other participants, with whom I am in an 'I-Thou' relationship. Hence, it is not egotistical, and I believe that that is what McNiff (2008) is warning against.

The 'I' becomes central to this research, from the standpoint of existentialism. By existentialism, I mean that the human subject is a free, living, feeling, and acting individual. According to existentialist thinking, as free and accountable individuals, we have to take sole responsibility for what we think and do, in the face of a world that seems overpowering, and yet meaningless (Satre, 1946). Existentialism speaks to how I as an individual encounter other individuals, groups, and society in the world, and in these encounters find understanding and meaning for living. My world of work as an HRD manager has a problem (toxicity) that I encounter daily at different levels, which affects me existentially as a manager, as I have physically suffered chest pains as a result of these encounters. In encounters with toxic leaders, toxic followers, and the

toxic environment in which I work, I have to make responsible choices, such as whether to deal with the problem head-on, or to accept the status quo, with all its negative consequences.

In order to make sense of the absurd, meaningless environment within which I work, and to survive within the college, the choice was to embrace organisational wellness as a value, and to ensure that my values were not violated in the workplace, thus reducing the cognitive and emotional dissonance, while allowing me to make sense of my environment and to live in it. The chest pains arose as a result of my being a toxic handler (Frost & Robinson, 1998), encountering the negative emotions of both managers and subordinates towards each other, where I became the buffer for the emotional trauma experienced in the workplace.

To further explain my understanding and my rationale for grounding the centrality of “I” in existentialism, I refer to the works of Jean-Paul Sartre (1946) and Martin Heidegger (1962). Sartre’s assertion that “existence precedes essence” is relevant at this point, as it emphasises the nature of humanism from an existentialist position (Sartre, 1946). What I experience, what I am, is not as a result of my essence – the fact that I am human – but as a result of what I do. The way I do my work, what matters enough to me to influence my behaviour, and how I relate to others, makes me human, not the other way around. Humans are capable of doing a lot of things that cannot be attributed to the essence of being truly human, such as bullying, abusing, and being narcissistic. In other words, the toxic behaviour that is experienced in the college is dehumanising to both victim and perpetrator. Thus, my ontological actions define my being. What the “I” in research does by way of praxis through participation with others defines my humanness, my existence as a living being in the world. The African concept of *ubuntu* operates along similar lines, where one’s humanness is not an essence in itself, but is a result of being in relationship to others. The relational process of existing in a particular way precedes the essence of being human. It is for this reason that life-enhancing values contribute to my being human, and they become the standards of judgement for validation of my research findings. These values are part of my existing in the world. A case in point is that *ubuntu* is not evident in xenophobic activity where South African people suddenly become aggressive and violent towards foreign refugees that run businesses in the country. The essence of what I am is not derived from being born into a culture that embraces *ubuntu*, but from what responsibility I take for my feelings, understanding, and actions, as I encounter a confused, absurd world, where poverty is high, and foreigners are perceived to be taking away jobs from locals.

Drawing from Martin Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein*, or ‘being there’ (Heidegger, 1962:), I am referring to the way I existentially see myself and others, as simultaneously ‘being there’ in the world as a researcher, ‘being there’ in the work context, and ‘being there’ in the action research

project. By further relying on Heidegger's concept of being 'thrown into the world', in my case the world or context of research, namely the TVET college where I work, I enter a world that, as Heidegger would say, has already been taken care of (Heidegger, 1962). Being 'thrown into the world' is not being thrown into only a historical context, but also into a context of possibilities – into that which can be imagined, which is yet to come. This means that the college has been handled, observed, understood, and taken care of already, historically speaking. In other words, in the context of the college, there are already understandings of the college organisation that precede me and others. However, entering as colleagues in the workplace, or as a researcher, or as members of the action learning set, we have a world of possibilities regarding what the college can become. This idea of possibilities raises the question of; "What is the next step?" If there were no next step, there would be no hope, no possibilities, and no likelihood of change.

There are, in Heidegger's terminology, 'present at hand' objects, relationships, knowledge, and systems that are already there in the workplace, whether I am there or not (Heidegger, 1962: 245). Put differently, it is what is taken for granted. While 'I' is central to self-study and living theory, as a participatory researcher, I do not cease to exist as the 'I', but I become aware of others, and the knowledge and the systems that are 'at hand', that are to be acknowledged as resourceful participants and agents in the research process. I cannot just take them for granted. In this sense, 'I', while being central, is not to be understood as if I am seen as an expert, with specialist knowledge or skills, while others are taken for granted as "lesser mortals". Rather, I am to be seen as a research participant in an action research process which will foster trust, openness, and respect within the action learning set. There is an acknowledgement that the concept of *Dasein* applies equally to others in the action learning set – they are 'there', 'thrown' into an organisation that has already been taken care of. They are indispensable for generating ideas, knowledge, and practices to bring about change, so that the college can reduce toxicity and foster wellness, as *Dasein* – a way of 'being there' – at work.

The centrality of the 'I' as researcher also impacts upon my learning as a researcher and as an HRD manager. The learning that takes place in this research process pertains mainly to me as a co-researcher with my action learning set. It is always about me first as the 'I' in the research, then about my colleagues and their learning, and finally about the institution's learning, as the approach of living theory is entrenched in self-study (Whitehead, 2009b).

If, at this stage, I left the 'I' as central to the research process, it may sound egotistical. However, the 'I' is never alone. I will now develop my thinking along this relational trajectory.

### **2.2.2 The “I” in relationship to others**

I acknowledge the insights that I gained while studying systematic theology from the existentialist religious philosophy of Martin Buber (2010). As an inside researcher, I understand that I have two realms of existence operating simultaneously in my way of being, namely (1) as a researcher, and (2) as an HRD manager at a TVET college. My total experience of existence is one of relationship, as I am the human resource manager. My work is focused on staff, their performance, rewards, development, and wellness in relationship to the college’s strategic plan. These two realms of existence cannot be separated. Buber refers to these two relationship realms of existence as “I-It” and “I-Thou” (Buber, 2010; Game, Marlin & Metcalfe, 2013). In the first relationship, namely “I-It”, the “It” refers to anything, innate objects, people, or mere things. These things have boundaries. The significance of this is that all these things are interrelated, linked, in one way or another – like links in a chain or an interconnected network. Ultimately, we as human beings are also “linked”, or interrelated. Thus, in the research context, I am in a relationship to colleagues, who are linked to others at various levels of organisational structure, be they subordinates, peers, or superiors. My existence, and that of my colleagues being in the world, is reliant on the experiences and existence of the “I-It” relationship that exists between us as employees, and can be extended to my relationship to things, systems, and objects within the TVET college. If the relationship is nothing more than an “I-It” relationship, then we see others only as objects, as “its”, with boundaries of existence and communication. It is for this reason that toxicity is experienced in the workplace, as staff are reduced to “its” – objects devoid of dialogical potential. The experience of these “I-It” relationships is evoked or mediated through speech, so that we interact between these linkages of “I-It” at the level of language, and it is through language (verbal and non-verbal) that people can be abused. But that is a narrow, incomplete existence, as we can also experience and exist in “I-Thou” relationships.

In the “I-Thou” encounter (Buber, 2010), I understand that Buber is saying that in this relationship of “I-Thou”, we are experiencing no-thing (nothing), which distinguishes this realm of existence from the “I-It” realm, which is constituted by things, boxed and bounded. The “Thou” is my relationship with and experience of spiritual beings, people, and nature, and it opens up communication possibilities to dialogical levels (Morgan & Guilherme, 2012). In my “I-Thou” relation to people, there is the possibility of speech, but in my relationship to nature, there is no speech. There may be awe, but there is no language, and yet there is still communication. An exquisite sunset may evoke the experience of romance for lovers walking on a beach. This world, although it does not actively play a part in my own existence, allows human beings the possibility of experiencing “I-Thou” relationships. It is in the “I-Thou” relationships that we see the higher potential of others, where we respect the “Thou” in them, and not the “It”, or the “thing”.

As an inside researcher, my experience and existence must acknowledge that I see my colleagues in the college not as things to be researched, but as “Thous”, mediated through inclusive discourse, respect, awe, wonderment, and acknowledgement. I cannot allow myself to conceive of my colleagues as things, cogs in the machinery of a mechanical organisation. In this way of seeing others, I as researcher will also be seen as a “Thou” in relationship to others. I am convinced that at the heart of action research is the ability to communicate efficiently and effectively, by honouring the “Thou” in others. Thus, the values of trust, respect, democracy, and transparency flow out of how I see others. My relationship with my colleagues is influenced by my speech that brings into being “I-Thou” relationships. Participation in action research is based on “I-Thou” relationships, and is developed and fostered when “I-Thou” relationships are established.

### ***2.2.3 The “I” in the process of becoming***

I ground myself in the research as an inside researcher, taking cognisance of the fact that nothing is stable, but that all things are dynamic and interconnected. The mechanical view of existence namely that all existence is fixed in time and space, is not part of my understanding of my existence as a participatory researcher. Drawing from Alfred Whitehead's (1979) ideas and process philosophy, I accept that all experiences are momentary, and all entities are non-permanent in essence. Rather than conceiving of things as fixed entities bounded by time and space, I see all things as being in the process of becoming. It is a matter of “now, but not yet” when I ground myself as the “I” in research. I am “now” like this for a moment, but I am in the process of becoming a researcher, where I am different from how I was a month ago, a week ago, or even yesterday. My relationship with my supervisor, with my reading, with my writing, with the members of my action learning set, with colleagues at work, and with society is shaping my becoming. To put it differently, I am in the process of becoming what I am not. If this applies to me, it also applies to all others, and to things, for that matter, such as my colleagues and my organisation. Having this frame of mind allows me to understand the dynamics of relationships with people, who are fickle and change, who participate fully in the research one day, and appear uncommitted the next. My research findings will never be fixed in time and space; hence, I will not be in a position to predict that what worked in one context will work in another context, due to changes in conditions, processes, and flows.

In the process of this research, I, with others, including the organisation itself, am in the process of becoming. From this perspective, it means that change is indefinable and inevitable, as change is part of the process itself. What change is needed is linked to the identification of a real problem (in this case, toxicity), and the action research cycles that I am engaged in focus at

a critical level on bringing about this change. Thus, action research is a process for change, and it fits well in my understanding of the need for organisational change to bring about wellness, through living out life-enhancing values in our everyday interactions. In the process the “I” in the “I-Thou” relationships will undergo change. Hence, self-study has as one of its outcomes a change in the existence – the being, or the life – of, firstly, the researcher, then others (“Thous”), and, finally, the organisation. This concept of the “I” changing resonates with me when I hear Michael Jackson (1987) sing “Man in the Mirror”. In this self-study, I grapple with the question “How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current toxicity which is experienced every day?” The lyrics written by Glen Ballard and Siedah Garrett of the above-mentioned song are apt at this point.

**“Man in the Mirror”**

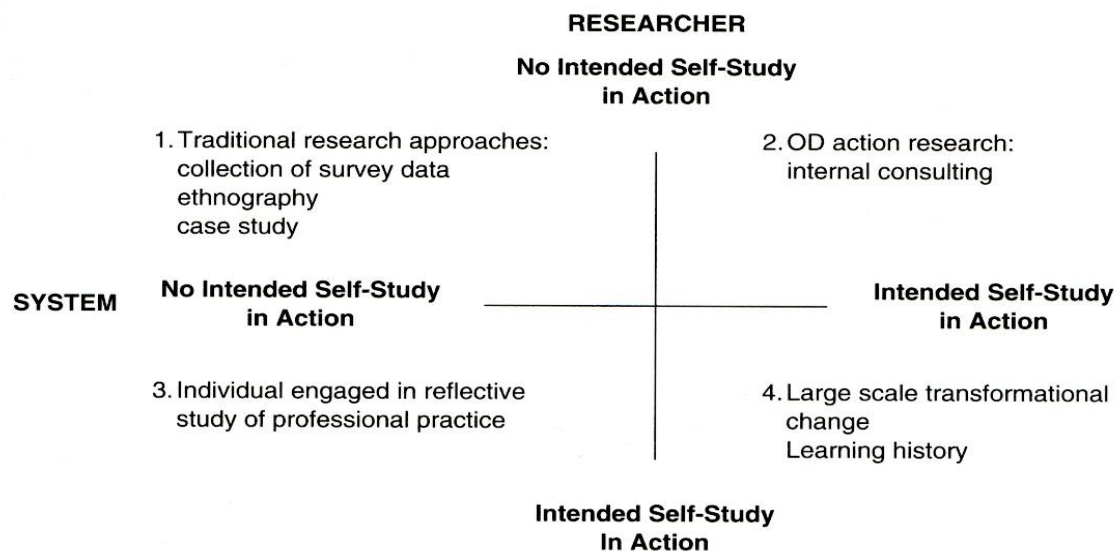
I’m gonna make a change  
For once in my life.  
It’s gonna feel real good.  
Gonna make a difference.  
Gonna make it right. [...]

I’m starting with the man in  
The mirror.  
I’m asking him to change  
His ways.  
And no message could have  
Been any clearer:  
“If you wanna make the world  
A better place  
(If you wanna make the  
World a better place),  
Take a look at yourself, and  
Then make a change  
(Take a look at yourself, and  
Then make a change).  
(Na na na, na na na, na na,  
Na nah)

**Source: Glen Ballard and Siedah Garrett (1987)**

### 2.2.4 The “I” in the organisational context

Coghlan and Brannick (2014:122) make a valid assertion, namely that “doing action research in your own organisation is opportunistic”, meaning that it is open for investigation, particularly if you are researching an occurrence that is evident, whether you address it or not. What this means is that there is a core real work-related problem that is to be addressed – in the case of my study, it is toxicity, which arises as a result of life-enhancing values not being lived out in the workplace. At another level, there is the thesis, the research product itself, with all its components, which terminates in a qualification. Both the core problem and the thesis are interwoven in the process of doing research. Hence the need for a researcher to identify which quadrant they will focus on, in the four quadrants that are created by two intersecting continua, namely that of the system and that of the researcher, as depicted in Figure 2.2.



**Figure 2.2: Focus of researcher and system (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014:123)**

In my case, I ground myself in Quadrant 3, with the intention of moving, during the research process, to Quadrant 4, as an outcome. This is supported by my acceptance of systems thinking, including chaos theory and complexity theory (Van Tonder, 2004), which maintains that a gestalt may appear as a small action in one area, and may have a major effect in another area of the organisation. I embed myself in action research, using self-study to improve my practice and bring about organisational change.

The emphasis in Quadrant 3 is “knowing-in-action” (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014:22). How this knowing transpires is twofold. It takes place through critical reflection on my own practice and the practice of others, and it may also be immediate, in that in the action process, one intuitively

changes what one is doing. This reaction and change is not arbitrary, but is based on new sensory information, which requires immediacy of thought. In this reaction to stimuli, learning takes place. The structure of knowing involves a process of sensory experience, followed by gaining understanding, and then making a judgement call, by way of evaluation, which is demonstrated in a decision made or an action taken (Melchin & Picard, 2008).

By locating myself in Quadrant 3, I am aware that the self-study aspect brings to the research process my own way of thinking, beliefs, values, perspectives, and ways of doing things as an HRD manager. It is not my intention to clone others into my way of being in the world. That would be presumptuous, as I come to the table as a participant, and not as an expert. However, I must have intent apart from completing a research project for degree purposes. My intent is to be a catalyst for change, a change agent, a player in the process to address the toxicity in the college where I work, by enhancing my personal values and those of the organisation, so as to improve the wellness in the college. Thus, there is a fine line between being an HRD manager, skilled and qualified in HRD management practices, in the organisation and being an equal among others, equally capable of identifying, planning, and intervening and reflecting on the process and outcomes in the action learning cycles. The ability to suspend, where necessary, my claim to pre-knowledge of organisational approaches for change management in the face of an openness to listen to the views and ideas of others is the knife-edge on which I must balance in this process. The timing of when to be the HRD manager and when to be the researcher rests on a dialectical relationship (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) that must be kept in tension, with give and take, and diplomacy. With this understanding of my role as both HRD manager and researcher, I realise the importance of accountability.

### **2.2.5 The “I” as the responsible self**

While studying for my undergraduate degree, I was introduced to the writings of the American ethicist Richard Niebuhr (1999). Bush (2010:59) sees Niebuhr’s ethical approach as being relevant, in that it enriches action reflection. The reason for this is that it contributes to an increase in awareness, a deepening of empathy, a social conscience, and engagement of students. Niebuhr’s model rests on four concepts, namely (1) responsiveness, which involves ethical decision making and behaviour, which are an agent’s response to something or someone else, and hence are contextually bound, (2) interpretation, which is the reflective process of finding a fitting or appropriate response, (3) social solidarity, which refers to the consciousness of society, so that ethics is thus a social construct, and (4) accountability. The implication is that ethical behaviour will always have consequences; hence the need to anticipate, by standing in the shoes of others, as it were, what the response may be to the behaviour, and to be accountable for the feedback. It is Niebuhr’s views on accountability that

influence me to draw into my understanding of grounding myself as the “I” as the responsible self in the research process.

For Niebuhr, accountability requires that we respond as agents within the social context, and in so doing, we anticipate how our social partners will respond to our response. It is not that I predict a response, but rather that I anticipate a response, or a range of responses; hence, I am still working in the contextual framework of complex systems theory and chaos theory. Niebuhr is highlighting the relational aspect of being in the world, where one is accountable for one’s relationships. At this point, he is influenced by the idea of the “generalised other”, as held by George Mead (1934:154). Mead and Niebuhr see the development of the “self” as a social process. This self emerges in a dialogical relationship between the self and the generalised other, by the “self” taking on the role of the other. In other words, I see myself through the eyes of the other person – I anticipate the response to my response (Harnisch, 2010). In this way, the self develops in seeing how the generalised others respond to my “self”. Thus, there can be no knowing of self apart from others. Mead maintains that the self consists of two aspects, the “I” and the “me”, which are in an ongoing communicative relationship (Harnisch, 2011). The “I” becomes objectified as a result of the “me”, that is, as a result of me being in the other person’s shoes (the generalised self). Construction of the self is as a result of the reflective dialogue between the “I” and the “me”. The implication of this understanding is that by being accountable for anticipating (being in the other person’s shoes), I am being accountable for the development of my own “self”.

Applying these understandings to researching my own organisation, I constantly weigh up what I am doing (my behaviour, actions, and decisions) by anticipating the response from my colleagues in the workplace, and particularly the members of my action learning set (ALS). In so doing, I am developing myself as a researcher. In addition, I take responsibility, and hence accountability, for the research process, for organisational change, and for the outputs both of my thesis and my research project. Undertaking action research in your own organisation is an ethical undertaking, and as a facilitator in the action learning set, it is of paramount importance that the researcher’s individuality as researcher is not sacrificed at the expense of their co-participation in a democratic process that identifies, plans, implements, and reflects within the action research cycle(s). There is an ethical responsibility and accountability that must be exercised in ensuring that the research does not go awry, to the detriment of me, my colleagues, or the organisation as a whole. By grounding myself as the responsible “I”, a first-person action researcher embarking on a study in living theory, I mitigate the chances of any harm coming to the participants. My values of caring and accountability are therefore lived out within the research project.

### **2.2.6 The “I” as a living contradiction**

Jack Whitehead (1989) introduced the idea that the researcher exists as a living contradiction when two diametrically opposed positions are experienced concurrently. When a value is held dear, but the negation of that very value is experienced, a living contradiction occurs. By grounding myself in the action research process, experiencing myself as “I” in a living contradiction draws into the research process the importance of my personal values. I therefore enter the research field as a value-laden researcher. It is these values that I am not able to relinquish, but rather I must ensure that these values become my standards of judgement. I have also experienced these living contradictions as a driver to bring about change. Refusal to allow my values to be negated motivates me to be transformative, so that I may experience harmony in my life, by reducing stress caused by this living contradiction.

When viewed from the perspective articulated above, it seems logical to invoke Festinger’s (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. Dissonance is caused when a behaviour is contrary to what is cognitively known to be correct. Tension results from behaviours, actions, and attitudes that are contrary to the values, or the standards of judgement, that would reduce the toxicity in the college, and enhance its organisational wellness.

In the following section, I turn my attention to the college sector, and I trace how this environment has developed historically and politically. It is within this environment that the “I” in this research is grounded. It is in this context that I ask the question “How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current toxicity which is experienced every day?” It is my contention that the organisational environment of my college within this sector is toxic.

### **2.3 Grounding myself in the TVET context**

Thus far, I have positioned myself as an inside researcher. I now turn my attention to the college sector in general, and to my college in particular. Before drawing this chapter to a close, I will draw on my understanding of complexity theory and chaos theory,<sup>1</sup> as a systems approach to help me to understand the historical and political influences on my workplace (Guastello, 2013; Van Tonder, 2004). Application of chaos theory to the workplace and to organisational development is not new (Massarik, 1990; Svyantek & DeShon, 1993). This theory is useful, as it

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<sup>1</sup> Chaos theory, together with complexity theory, is dealt with in greater detail in chapter 3, the chapter on my theoretical and paradigmatic choices underpinning this research.

offers explanations of how, in a dynamic organisation, where predictions cannot be made, attractors allow systems to operate within a chaotic environment. A small change in one system may have a huge effect on another system; conversely, a significant change in one system may have no effect on another system.

Context gives meaning; therefore, it is imperative that I pay attention to how the college sector has developed and is developing to meet skills shortages, alleviate poverty, and provide for the human resource needs of a developmental state, as outlined in the National Skills Development Strategy III (NSD III, 2011). I must take account of what effect these changes have had on my own development, and on the development of the organisation. My understanding of this historical context influences the meaning that I attach to my current perceptions of my subjective reality, as reality is constructed through perceptions, understandings, and assumptions (Andrews, 2012).

Rigorous scientific research is not done in a vacuum (Mouton, 1996), and in generating my living theory as an outcome of my action research enquiry, I locate my research specifically in the college where I work, which, in turn, is embedded in the TVET sector. It is in this contextual framework of the TVET sector in general, and more specifically in the college where I work, that I have experienced organisational toxicity, which has negatively affected my health and the wellness of other employees. In this context, I as an HRD manager daily create and influence the organisational landscape of the college, through my output as a manager, and, more importantly, in my relationships and interaction with colleagues as I live out fully my life-enhancing values, which in the context of the college are being denied.

### ***2.3.1 A brief historical overview of the TVET sector***

Based on my own reflection and discussions I have had with some of my ALS members, I have come to the conclusion that those outside of the TVET sector, as well as the majority of my colleagues, do not understand the historical context of the colleges. Hence, I wish to present an account of the history of the college, in order to show the effect of the past system on the current perceptions, activities and culture in the college where I work. In order to do so, I need to show how historically, the vocational and technical education system prior to 1994 was used for the benefit of the white population. The apartheid system of education chiselled out a historical landscape for the college sector, which is still evident 20 years into South Africa's new democracy, if one compares the infrastructure and resources of the historically white institutions with those of the historically black institutions. The biased thinking embedded in apartheid philosophy, which served the minority white population, was entrenched in colonial and apartheid systems of education.

Lord Milner, a staunch colonial imperialist and British patriot, in 1903 expressed the idea of black inferiority:

One of the strongest arguments why the White man must rule is because that is the only possible means of raising the Black man, not to our level of civilisation – which it is doubtful whether he would ever attain – but to a much higher level than that which he at present occupies. (Headlam, 1933:467)

Technical and vocational education in South Africa can be traced back to French and British influences in the late nineteenth century. I believe that Badroodien (2004) and Malherbe (1977) correctly distinguished between technical education and industrial/vocational education as a racial segregation strategy embedded in the apartheid legacy. Vocational education prior to 1910 was suitable for non-whites, namely blacks, Coloureds, and Indians, and concentrated on skills for cabinet and wagon making, building, and road construction, particularly in the Cape Colony.

After 1910, the government of what was then the Union of South Africa reversed this trend; vocational education became a solution for skilling poor whites, and according to Badroodien (2004:22), it was seen as preparation for “Kaffir work”,<sup>2</sup> which was looked down on as degrading and unacceptable. The perception by whites was that if you received vocational education and did the work that black people were doing, you were no better than a black person, and were therefore “the lowest of the low” in the South African context.

By 1913, the focus of vocational education again changed, as it became a mechanism to address social welfare problems experienced by white youth. Now the emphasis was no longer only on education, but also on the rehabilitation of wayward youth. Between 1913 and 1917, four industrial schools, known as reformatories (Blumfield, 2008), were established in terms of the Children’s Protection Act, Act No. 25 of 1913.

Technical education developed alongside vocational education, and was seen as more academic than vocational education, which was more craft-related. The need for technical education was driven by economic factors, which led to the development of this system of

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<sup>2</sup> The word “Kaffir” is derived from the Arabic word *kāfir*, which means “an infidel, an unbeliever”. (Oxford Dictionary. However, in South Africa, the word is a highly racially offensive and abusive taboo word. During the apartheid era, the word was used to designate black African people. Today, use of the word is unlawful, and can lead to a case of *crimen injuria* being lodged with the courts.

education.<sup>3</sup> These economic factors were the rapid growth of two industries at the turn of the eighteenth century, namely the mining industry (gold mining, and diamond mining), as well as the expansion of the rail network across the country. In fact, as early as 1884, the government of the then Natal started offering apprenticeships in the railway workshops in Durban.

When South Africa became a democratic state in 1994, the African National Congress-led government dealt head-on with the education and training system which they had inherited. In order to redress the past imbalances and wrongs, a change in landscape was required, and it was developed through the promulgation of a plethora of White Papers and Acts of Parliament, which I highlight in section 2.3.5.

### **2.3.2 Political influences**

The historically black colleges of education, which operated during the apartheid system, were discriminated against in the areas of infrastructure development, HR capacity, governance, and student support matters (Kraak & Hall, 1999; Sooklal 2004). The apartheid system of education was not a mistake of history, but intentional, planned, carefully executed, and informed by various reports such as the Eiselen Commission in 1941 which attempted to protect the artificially created apartheid system of white privilege, and to ensure white domination over people of colour. Hendrik Verwoerd, when he was Minister of Native Affairs, as the portfolio was called, spelled out the apartheid philosophy of education, when he said “There is no place for [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour” (Rose & Tunmer, 1975:266). A year prior to this, he declared, “When I have control of Native education I will reform it so that Natives will be taught from childhood to realize that equality with Europeans is not for them” (Christy, 1986:12). Walker (1995:12) points out that in 1945, even before Verwoerd became Minister of Native Affairs, J.N. Le Roux, who was a Member of Parliament, and who later became Minister of Agriculture, commented, “We should not give the Natives any academic education. If we do this [...] who is going to do the manual labour in the country?”

### **2.3.3 Economic influences**

As I have already pointed out in section 2.3.1, the development of the mining industry supported and funded the establishment of technical education. However, Sooklal (2004:30) draws attention to the fact that the technical and vocational and college sector was in “relative stagnation” from 1950 to 1980, as a result of the decline in the economy. Where colleges were being established however, was in the homelands to encourage blacks not to migrate to the

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<sup>3</sup> A distinction between vocational and technical/industrial education was that technical education used to have a higher academic status than vocational education. However, this distinction has become blurred, in that both vocational and technical systems of education now offer trades.

cities. The apartheid education system in South Africa was faced with political challenges, as the school system had become a site of struggle. In short, it is clear that the college sector was fragmented, racially divided, and unresponsive to the needs of human resource development and industry, and it needed radical transformation.

#### **2.3.4 Transformation of the TVET sector post-1994**

I now highlight the development of post-apartheid education and training and the establishment of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, or further education and training (FET) colleges, as they used to be called. The past two decades have seen major changes and transformation in the TVET sector. Colleges have gone through a number of mergers. For example, colleges of education merged with technical colleges, and soon thereafter merged again into multi-campus FET colleges, which are currently being migrated from the provincial Department of Education to the national Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), as a matter of national competency. In other words they will report to and be directly governed by the national Minister of Higher Education and Training.

The latest White Paper for Post-School Education and Training was approved by Cabinet on 20 November 2013, and it is the latest attempt by the DHET to change the landscape of higher education. As a result of this White Paper, FET colleges were renamed “TVET colleges”, and they are in the process of being migrated from the competencies of the provinces to the DHET, as from 1 April 2015.

#### **2.3.5 The legislative framework**

The African National Congress (ANC) government took a policy approach to transformation, so as to ensure transparent, democratic legitimacy in redressing the imbalances of the apartheid legacy, and to transform the economy of the country. In order to redress the past imbalances and wrongs, a change in landscape was required, and it was developed through the promulgation of a plethora of White Papers and Acts of Parliament. Two strategies for dealing with the economy and the skills shortages in the country emerged. The ANC introduced a Policy Framework for Education and Training (ANC, 1994) and a Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP, 1994).

The Policy Framework for Education and Training (1994:3) embraces the following principles:

- The state has the central responsibility in the provision of education and training.
- The provision of education and training shall be planned as part of a coherent and comprehensive national social and economic reconstruction and development programme,

including a national strategy for the development of human resources, and the democratisation of our society.

- A nationally determined framework of policy and incentives shall ensure that employers observe their fundamental obligation towards the education and training of their workers.
- Education and training policy and practice shall be governed by the principle of democracy, ensuring the active participation of various interest groups, in particular teachers, parents, workers, students, employers, and the broader community.
- In the process of ensuring education and training for all, there shall be special emphasis on the redress of educational inequalities among historically disadvantaged groups, such as the youth, the disabled, adults, women, the unemployed, and rural communities.
- There shall be mechanisms to ensure horizontal and vertical mobility and flexibility of access between general formative, technical, industrial, and adult education and training in both the formal and non-formal sectors.
- There shall be nationally determined standards for accreditation and certification for formal and non-formal education and training, with due recognition of prior learning and experience.
- The education process shall aim at the development of a national democratic culture, with respect for the value of our people's diverse cultural and linguistic traditions, and shall encourage peace, justice, tolerance, and stability in our communities and our nation.
- Education shall be based upon the principles of cooperation, critical thinking, and civic responsibility, and shall equip individuals for participation in all aspects of society.

I have purposely listed these principles, as they form the bedrock of the government's strategies to redress past inequalities, and to ensure transformation of the education and training system in post-apartheid South Africa. These principles are enshrined in the Constitution, and they find expression in the policies that were subsequently promulgated.

The following Acts of Parliament, among others, introduced after 1994, with the aim of redressing past imbalances, have a direct bearing on the governance and running of the colleges:

- The South African Qualifications Authority Act, Act No. 58 of 1996 (SAQA Act 1996);
- The Basic Conditions of Employment Act, Act No. 75 of 1997 (BCE Act 1997);
- The Employment of Educators Act, Act No. 76 of 1998 (EEA Act 1998);
- The Skills Development Act, Act No. 97 of 1998 (SD Act 1998);
- The Further Education and Training Act, Act No. 98 of 1998;
- The Skills Development Levies Act, Act No. 9 of 1999;

- The Further Education and Training College Act, Act No. 3 of 2012 (FETC 2012);

Many of the current managers and leaders were not part of the education system staff that were workshopped on these Acts in the 1990s, nor do they understand how to apply the Acts consistently. At the same time, many trade union representatives have a better working knowledge of the Acts, and are able to identify gaps in weak leadership and exploit the situation to suit their members, with the result that trade unions in many workplaces are seen as a threat, or as having too much influence in the running of the colleges.

### ***2.3.6 Implications leading to a conducive environment for toxicity to take root***

In the absence of strong organisational values in the workplace, confusion creates toxic environments that create spaces where toxic systems take root (Appelbaum, Iaconi & Matousek, 2007; Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007). The confusion creates a breeding ground for toxic leaders and toxic followers, who hijack the transformation process for their own personal agendas. This “confused space”, in itself, contributes to systems becoming toxic. I refer to the college organisation as being in a “confused space” when there is a lack of communication, poor understanding of legislative procedures, and no organisational direction. The presence of this type of work context supports my choice for using Padilla’s (2007) toxic triangle model, which includes the toxic environment as one of the elements or components in the triangle.

Put differently, my argument is that when there is confusion, poor communication, poor management, a lack of decisive leadership, a lack of policy interpretation, personal agendas, a lack of accountability, and no consequences for non-performance, and where personal and organisational values are not evident, a climate is created where toxic leaders and toxic followers can flourish. In fact, the space is a toxic environment, in and of itself. We can safely conclude that the TVET sector has in both the pre-apartheid and the post-apartheid eras operated in a climate of confusion. Prior to 1994, the education and training system was undemocratic, it served class and race needs, it lacked accountability towards all the citizens of the country, and it lacked the values entrenched in human rights. The period since 1994 has been characterised, on the one hand, by an unwillingness by some leaders to transform colleges from apartheid institutions to democratic institutions, and, on the other hand, by a hijacking of the transformation process for personal agendas. For some, the workplace has not transformed sufficiently, and it is still a site of struggle. The broader socio-economic and political context of the country has made great strides in dealing with the legacy of apartheid, but for some, the “rainbow nation”, a term coined by Desmond Tutu to describe post-apartheid South Africa as a symbol of hope and unity in diversity, has not been realised, and has been viewed as a farce (Habib, 1997; Filatova, 2011). Many TVET employees and students who are tired of

waiting for economic freedom want the colleges to transform more rapidly, which is evident from the demands related to finances, when strike activity is engaged in.

## **2.4 Experiencing toxicity as an HRD manager within a TVET workplace**

Having grounded myself as a researcher using action research in my own organisation, and having grounded myself in the TVET college sector, I now ground myself in a TVET college as an HRD manager. I will briefly touch on my career as an academic, an administrator, and a manager. From this brief overview, I will also highlight the lessons I have learnt that have underpinned and strengthened my ontological values, which have been denied, and which has led to cognitive and emotional dissonance, which has driven me to find a way to enhance my values, which will, in turn, reduce the toxicity experienced in the TVET college where I work.

### ***2.4.1 Historical view of my career path within the college sector***

I am the human resource and development (HRD) manager at one of the 50 TVET colleges in South Africa, responsible for the skilling and development of 341 employees. Some of my key result areas (KRAs), apart from staff training, include organisational wellness, organisational development, and labour relations. I am currently managing a process where selected staff from the college council, as the employer, are being migrated to the National Department of Higher Education and Training, as the employer. This process has resulted in senior management having to deal with dissatisfied staff. However, my career in the college goes back before that, to 1985.

I started my academic career in 1985 as a lecturer in one of the six colleges of education, in the then Bophuthatswana, which was one of the 10 former Bantustans (homelands)<sup>4</sup> of South Africa. The college of education was affiliated to the University of Bophuthatswana, which gave it academic status. I progressed through the ranks as lecturer and senior lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies. I was then appointed to Head of Department: Special Subjects, which included Religious Studies, Art, Music, Librarianship, Guidance, Physical Education, and Home Economics.

I am very grateful for the challenging experience that this promotion afforded me, as I had 13 lecturers, which included black and white and male and female South Africans, a Ghanaian, a Ugandan, and a Filipino, who enriched the department with their various different perspectives

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<sup>4</sup> Homelands were demarcated areas within the borders of South Africa, created for the location of African persons based on culture, language, and ethnic group (Egero 1991). In this way, the apartheid system entrenched segregation and controlled and limited the movement of Africans to urban areas – as part of the apartheid government's policy of separate development.

on teacher education. It was during this period that I learned to listen intently, not just to hear what people were saying, but to try to understand what they were saying from their own perspective, the aspirations and intentions behind what they were actually articulating. I also found that I was always a facilitator and a mediator between differing views, and I became acutely aware of the prevailing balance of power. In any departmental discussions, I had to ensure that the playing field was even, that all staff were given an opportunity to speak, that all staff were respected, and that all staff were allocated the same amount of time to articulate their point of view.

A career change took place in 1998, when I moved out of the academic arena into administration, by becoming the vice-rector of the college of education where I was working. In the same year, the college was asked by the Director-General of Education to take over the management of a technical college campus that had encountered problems with its host, an agricultural college in Taung, due to student misbehaviour. Hence, I was initiated into the TVET sector, as my administrative tasks were to manage two colleges, namely a teacher training college and a technical college, which existed under one roof.

On reflection, this new position afforded me the opportunity to grow and develop, and to sharpen my leadership skills in a very hostile environment as staff and students from the two colleges sectors were often in conflict. For example, the college of education students saw themselves as professionals (teachers) in the making, and wanted nothing to do with the technical college students. The college of education students perceived themselves as studying for a profession which would give them access to white-collar jobs, while the technical college learners were preparing for employment as blue-collar workers. This difference in self-perception was so obvious that when meetings in the hall were called, by either the student representative council (SRC) or by management, the students located themselves as two separate groups, and never the twain would meet, where the technical college students would congregate to the left, and the college of education students would congregate to the right. Not only was there a difference in terms of social class between the two groups of students, but there was also an age difference between them. The technical college students were much younger, where some were still doing a technical matric,<sup>5</sup> while the college of education students were post-matric age, and some were even in their late twenties. Within the African culture, it is expected of a younger person to respect an older person. Consequently, power play was imposed along cultural roles.

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<sup>5</sup> The final year of schooling in the school system, which extends from Grade 1 to 12, is referred to as the “matric” year, and the final school-leaving certificate that is awarded on completion of the 12 years of general education is referred to as a “matric certificate”.

At far as staff was concerned, the majority of the technical college lecturers did not have academic qualifications, but instead were qualified as artisans, and had diplomas. Consequently, they were not allowed to wear academic gowns and hoods at functions, as they did not have teaching qualifications, and they were thus seen as less qualified, and not as academic professionals. The result was that the technical college staff wanted to boycott such functions, and they felt inferior to the teacher training college staff. Working within this environment made me very aware of people's feelings, the damage that positions of power can play when trying to build teamwork, and the danger of according staff dignity on the basis of what they have achieved, and not on the basis of who they are as human beings.

In 2002, the teacher training college had to decide whether it would become a campus of the University of Bophuthatswana (Unibo), offering academic programmes, or whether it would merge with other technical colleges into a new FET college in the North West province. The college council, in consultation with the staff, decided to ask the provincial Department of Education to merge it with the other technical colleges, as this would benefit the majority of the staff, who did not have master's degrees, which is a requirement to teach at a university. The idea behind the mergers was to enable smaller colleges, which may not have capacity personnel and infrastructure, to benefit by virtue of their being merged with more advantaged colleges (Zuma, 2000). This process would also help to address the issues of staff equity, student equity, accessibility, and effective use of resources, thereby redressing the disparities inherited from the apartheid system. However, while the mergers were a necessity, employees were emotionally affected by the transfers, and the mergers caused stress and anxiety among staff. This was documented by De Wet (2008) and Pillay (2009), who reported on the negative effects of mergers on staff in FET colleges. These mergers of technical colleges into mega, multi-campus FET colleges in South Africa saw the end of traditional technical colleges in South Africa, and the beginning of what came to be known as the further education and training (FET) sector.

The rectors of the teacher training colleges and the rectors of the technical colleges were transferred to the corporate centres, and they were matched to the various different portfolios, through a process of consultation and a collective agreement with union stakeholders. I was matched to the portfolio of human resources, hence my current position. This position affords me the opportunity to engage staff at various different levels, as manager, as counsellor, as facilitator of training, and as a friend and professional colleague. It is this privileged relationship due to my organisational position that allows me to interact at a very personal level with staff, and to build professional trusting relationships with them. In this trusting relationship, staff have

opened up to me and shared their hurt, frustration, and experiences, which can be understood from the perspective of the toxic triangle. Their voices will come through clearly in chapter 7, the chapter in which I present my data, and where I validate my claims.

I personally have experienced organisational toxicity in the college where I work, which resulted in my experiencing chest pains, which went away after a toxic manager was removed by the unions from his position at the corporate centre. I am very aware that I must not get caught up in the blame game, as was pointed out by one of the critical readers when I submitted my research proposal. In addition, I have tried to rid myself of any anger that I may experience after having been diagnosed in 2014 with colon cancer, and having completed my chemotherapy. However, I cannot find my voice if I do not narrate the experiences of being a toxic handler – the buffer between toxic leaders and fellow colleagues. As HRD manager, I would have to stand on one side, absorbing the fury of senior management against union members who worked in my department, and then stand on the side of the unions' representatives who wanted to vent their feelings towards management. I was continually being the buffer for both sides, listening to abusive language, derogatory remarks, and rude dehumanising attitudes shown by both sides towards the other. As HRD manager, I was every day trying to keep the peace, defusing explosive situations, and ensuring that work was still being performed by staff.

I recall one instance where an employer in my department, when asked to work overtime for two hours to ensure that personnel files were up to date and ready for an audit, said “Who is instructing this? You, or the boss? Because if it's you, I will do it, but I won't if it's the boss”. The staff had this type of reaction towards management, because it was self-evident that management did not apply policy fairly, or they were perceived to be doing as they liked, even when they were made aware that what they were going to do was wrong. The collage and accompanying narratives of my action learning set will validate these claims. As HRD manager, I am equally aware that there are employees that have demanded the removal of certain managers, in both middle management and senior management. The stakeholder union had a senior manager removed, and although the manager won his case at the Labour Court, he was blocked by the union, resulting in him having had to stay at home, with full pay, for the past five years.

#### ***2.4.2 Towards a provisional understanding of my context***

The question that must now be addressed is “How does this personal and historical information contribute to my understanding of the toxicity that my colleagues and I experience as employees of the college?” It is my contention that we as South Africans are still a society divided along the lines of class and race, even now, 20 years into our democracy. There is little

by way of social cohesion (Struwig, Davids, Roberts, Sithole, Tilly, Weir-Smith and Makhele, 2011). While we have addressed the system of apartheid at a political and policy level, at an individual level the values that underpin a non-racist, transparent, democratic, loving, and caring society are not evident in the workplace or in the broader society. What takes place in the experience, thinking, and expectations of people in the wider society and the community is brought into the workplace by individual workers. Organisations are influenced and pressured by society's expectations and employees' individual personalities (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2007; Dauber, Fink & Yolles, 2012).

Much of what can be described as toxic is due to some staff, on the one hand, not understanding the transformation process that must take place within the TVET sector. They are slow to relinquish old habits and attitudes, and they feel threatened by the fact that other people can do a job just as well as they can. I see little evidence of respect, tolerance, and accommodation of colleagues in meetings and at functions. Different cultural and value systems exacerbate the gender, race and class differences between the various different groups of staff. On the other hand, there are many from the formerly disadvantaged population groups who believe in entitlement, and who believe in radical transformation, regardless of the fact that there is corrective legislation in place, such as the Employment Equity Act, Act No. 76 of 1998. It must be mentioned though that for the majority of staff, there are good working relations, there is clear evidence of acceptance of all staff as fellow human beings, and attempts are being made to build interpersonal relationships.

## **2.5 Summary**

In this chapter I have drilled down from exploring myself as a researcher, to working within the TVET sector and then drilled deeper down to my work as an HRD Manager as outlined in Figure 2.1 in order to focus on my dual role and function as an inside researcher and manager. Within this context I have embedded my research question. In the following chapter I highlight my theoretical stance that will influence the rest of the study.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

#### 3.1 Introduction

As I give an account of my epistemological journey, describing my lived experiences as an HRD manager, culminating in a living theory (Whitehead, 1989) of organisational development, I must ensure academic rigour, as it is easy in a self-study to fall into subjectivity. Action research practitioners developing educational theories, as distinct from education theories, must include “validated explanations of their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of social formations in which the researcher lives, works and researches” (Whitehead, 2007). Using a living theory approach in action research does not mean that I merely give an account of my practice and understanding, devoid of a solid academic foundation. Quite the contrary, I am obliged to demonstrate what influences have guided my theoretical choices and what processes of engaging in action research I have undertaken. This commitment to validity and rigour is part of my ethical social accountability (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009). Hence, I want to identify the most important theories and models that have an impact on my understanding of what I am researching, and the process I am using in my research, in order to answer my research question, namely;

‘How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current climate of toxicity which is experienced every day?’.

I now introduce five of these theoretical influences, tracing their history, the philosophical positions which support their main characteristics, some alternatives, the reason for choosing them, and their significance for my research. I will return to an explanation of action research in the following chapter, which lays the methodological foundation for my study.

#### 3.2 Organisation theories and organisational development theories

From the outset, I do not want to confuse organisation theories, sometimes referred to simply as “theories of organisations”, with organisational development (OD) theories. There are differences between these two types of theories. However, it is important to understand organisational theories, as the framework for understanding organisational development theory. Organisation theory is focused on an explanation of what an organisation is, and how it functions, from a range of different perspectives, such as management, human resource management, organisational structure, and change management. Van Tonder (2004:14) defines organisation theory as that set of related concepts and principles which aims to provide a plausible description of, and an

explanation for, the nature and functioning of the organisation, and how the organisation impacts on or is impacted by the broader context (e.g. society) and the people with whom it interacts.

By couching his definition in these terms, he excludes the fields of both organisational psychology and organisational behaviour, and rightly so, because they impact more on organisational development theory, which I will deal with later in the chapter. Suffice it at this stage to say that this is one of the differences between organisation theory and organisational development theory, namely the development of the organisation, and the development of the employees. It is plausible to think of organisation theory in computer terms, as the hardware, and organisational development theory as the software. While they are separate entities, they function within the same system. Hence, I have found in my experience as an HR manager that it is pointless to expect change and development in an organisation by paying attention to only one aspect of an organisation, such as only its employees, or only its structure. Van Tonder (2004:10) concedes that the organisation cannot change unless the individual employee changes, which thus links organisational behaviour to change management, which is, in turn, linked to organisation theory. In my opinion, this interrelatedness indicates the interwoven nature of an understanding of organisational development, which must be understood against the backdrop of organisation theory.

The logic behind this point of view is as follows: “How can I understand organisational development if I do not first have an understanding of what constitutes an organisation?” The way we perceive what an organisation is, and how it functions, determines how we perceive change within an organisation, and how we perceive the change agents (Van Tonder, 2004:16). How we see or perceive organisations is, in turn, influenced by our world view, our paradigms, and the organising principles by which we make sense of the world of work. I understand the world of work to mean the answers that are forthcoming from asking an employed person the questions “What do you do?”, “Where do you do it?”, and “What meaning does it have for you?” The world of work is very fluid, and is in constant flux, as organisations are continually changing and adapting to meet the sociopolitical and economic demands of society. In order to give a plausible answer or explanation as to what constitutes an organisation, I have to engage theory, and theory arises from a paradigmatic source, such as positivism or post-positivism. In my methodology chapter (chapter 4), I will deal in greater depth with these concepts. Suffice it for the moment to speak of a positivist paradigm as the viewing of reality as the real world, including organisations, objectively and scientifically verifiable through observation of cause and effect, which can be measured, generalised, and predicted.

However, while a positivist paradigm may be useful in the natural sciences, I reject its usefulness in the social sciences, for the following reasons: people are unpredictable, they have a mind of their own, they are influenced by relationships, and they exercise their choices based on their own paradigms. Furthermore, such a paradigm isolates the subject from the object, the 'researcher' from the 'researched', as if the subjectivity and values of the research practitioner have no bearing on what is being researched, on the participants in the research, or on the outcomes of the research. Finally, such a paradigm is built on an assumption, namely that the social world can be researched and investigated in the same way as the natural world, using the same types of methods (Mackenzie, 2006). In the positivist paradigm, the researcher is merely the controller of the research (Taylor & Medina, 2013). They pay little attention to relationships, and hence to the human dynamics between people, and consequently reduce the world and people to 'things'. Hence, this view of the world is mechanistic, in that it reduces organisations and their employees to machines, which can be built, manipulated, tweaked, dismantled, replaced, and discarded.

Classical organisation theory can be traced back to the early 1920s (1900-1930) (Van Tonder, 2004). It emerges from this mechanistic positivist paradigm, emphasising the impersonal organisational structure and administration of organisations, with the metaphor of an organisation being a "machine", and the individual members of the organisation being "gears" and "screws" (Yang, Liu & Wang, 2013:4470). Classical organisation theory has been influenced by Taylor, Weber and Fayol (often referred to as Taylorism). Taylor's scientific management theory rests on four principles that were to be followed, namely to discover the best way to perform a task, to align each worker with each task, to supervise employees, and to reward them as a means of motivation (extrinsic motivation), where managers must plan and control (Taylor, 2011). Thus, his contribution to organisation theory was focused on productivity at the expense of interpersonal relationships within an organisation, that is, profit before people. Weber's (Weber, 1947) contribution to organisation theory came by way of his bureaucratic theory, in which he viewed an organisation as a machine (Van Tonder, 2004). He expanded on Taylorism by taking into consideration the network of relationships within the workplace, but reduced them to cause and effect, and placed them within the framework of bureaucracy, with a strong hierarchical power base to ensure stability of the organisation. Truth in the epistemology of this positivist paradigm is held to be reliable, and can be duplicated, as 'one size fits all'. Flowing from this epistemology is the seeking after rules and standards of measurement, and the control of employees' compliance to these rules (truths). By the middle of the last century, classical organisation theorists were superseded by the human relations movement, largely because of the former's disregard for the role employees played within an organisation.

The human relations movement can be traced back to Mayo, Maslow, Lewin, Herzberg, Hawthorne studies, Barnard, and McGregor, where there was an attempt to humanise management, by including values of participatory democracy, concern for employees' attitudes and feelings, and an emphasis on small groups and teamwork (Sarker & Khan, 2013; Van Tonder, 2004; Yang *et al.*, 2013). However, while this movement reacted to the classical organisation theorists' positivist, mechanistic view of organisations, by introducing the view that organisations were dynamic social entities, and it engaged with other disciplines, such as psychology and sociology, it still operated from a functionalist paradigm (Van Tonder, 2004). The functionalist paradigm sees the organisation as an object that is predictable, capable of being controlled in such a way as to maximise functionality and limit employee unhappiness, so as to ensure stability. Hence, one of the major principles of the human relations theory was that worker satisfaction leads to enhanced worker performance. Thus, the role of management was not to oil the machinery of the organisation, as was espoused by classical organisation theory, but to ensure equilibrium in the workplace between management and workers. Both classical and neoclassical theories, such as the human relations organisation theory, which dominated for the better part of the last century, operated within what would have been accepted by humanists as a closed system. In other words, organisations were seen as distinct from the outside world, autonomous and isolated. It was only from the early 1980s onwards that there was a proliferation of organisational theories that took into account what was happening on the outside of organisations, and the effect that these influences had on organisations. Thus, organisations were no longer seen as closed systems, but as open systems. I will expand on this later in the chapter, when I address systems thinking, within complexity theory and chaos theory.

However, it is my experience as an HR manager in the public TVET college sector, and in my college in particular, that there is still a tendency to manage colleges within a classical organisation theory framework. Such a framework is characterised by a bureaucratic system of governance, where the power lies in the hands of four or five senior managers, to make decisions, control outcomes, and manipulate staff, in order to reach targets for the Department of Higher Education and Training. In turn, as senior management, they are caught up in a similar system within the national Department of Higher Education and Training. It is a case of 'monkey see, monkey do'. There is little evidence of participation and proper consultation in managing the college. Joint decision making with middle management is low, and employees are moved from one post to another at random. The perception among staff is that students and unions have more clout than managers and the college council in managing and running the college. Validation of these claims will become evident in later chapters. The following of classical organisation theory, propped up by a positivist paradigm as world view, where

employees are reduced to machines, contributes to the toxicity triangle that is prevalent in the college where I work. Being employed within this understanding of organisation theory is dehumanising, as this understanding lacks a commitment to the basic human and organisational values of compassion, caring, transparency, participation, and trust.

I have spent time discussing organisation theory for three reasons. One of the reasons is that without this background, organisational development (OD) would not be understood correctly. Another reason is that OD only came into its own as a field of study after the Second World War, even though its roots predate the war. The third reason is that organisational development processes were carried out prior to OD becoming a field of study in its own right, but they were done under the auspices of organisation theory. OD has its origins in five influences, namely the National Training Laboratories (NTL) which was set up by a joint grant to study group dynamics and development, by the United States office for Naval Research and the National Education Association in 1946. The NTL emphasised T-groups (training groups) consisting of 8 to 15 trainees. The emphasis of the T group training was that participants were able to learn about their own behaviour as well as the interactions and dynamic of the group. Kurt Lewin's contribution to the methodology of the T-groups based on his interest in the behavioural sciences influenced his action research, particularly his change model, with its emphasis on unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Likert's participatory management theory and Moutons participatory grid approach encompassed the quality of work-life and influenced OD thinking to take into account the life lived at work and outside of work as external factors that affect what happens in the workplace, and the strategic change model (Cummings & Worley, 2015:7; Gupta, 2013). OD is an interdisciplinary field of study integrating inputs from "business, industrial/organizational psychology, human resources management, communication, [and] sociology" (Anderson, 2013:2), among others.

One of the best-known definitions of OD is that of Beckhard (1969:9), where he defines OD as "an effort (1) planned, (2) organization-wide, (3) managed from the top, to (4) increase organization effectiveness and health through (5) planned interventions in the organization's 'processes', using behavioural-science knowledge". What emerges from this definition that I like as an HR manager is the acknowledgement that development is undertaken for the purpose of increased effectiveness and health of the organisation, and, secondly, the use of behavioural science in the process, as this caters for the behaviour, attitudes, emotions, and values of the individual employees. Organisational behaviour and organisational psychology play an important role in change at an organisational level, but also at an individual level, since organisational change, as I said earlier, cannot occur unless there is individual change. Beckhard's definition takes into account the emotional aspects of change within an organisation,

including resistance to change. His definition is a move away from the positivist paradigm of seeing organisations as machines, but the definition does not go far enough, as it is still firmly entrenched in a top-down mindset of authoritarianism, which does not take into consideration that change can be a bottom-up process. In fact, there are some scholars who do not hold the position that change can be managed. For example, Mintzberg, Lampel and Ahlstrand (1998:325) assert that change “can be ignored, resisted, responded to, capitalized upon, and created”, but that it “can’t be managed”. I agree with this position, as change has a life, an energy, a momentum, and a direction of its own, as it is unpredictable, and it occurs within a complex and chaos system.

Among the proliferation of definitions which have been offered for OD, of which, according to Anderson (2013), Egan studied 27 and extracted 60 variables, I still believe that Burke and Bradford’s (2005) definition is the most comprehensive definition, as well as the most acceptable definition for the purposes of my investigation. Burke and Bradford (2005:12) base OD on “(1) a set of values, largely humanistic; (2) application of the behavioral sciences; and (3) open systems theory”, and they define OD as “a systemwide process of planned change aimed toward improving overall organization effectiveness by way of enhanced congruence of such key organizational dimensions as external environment, mission, strategy, leadership, culture, structure, information and reward systems, and work policies and procedures”. Firstly, their definition is important in that they have taken into consideration external environmental elements that need to be aligned with internal change processes within the organisation, in order for development to occur that will ultimately be effective. Within the TVET sector, my college has faced external changes brought about by ministries of education such as the mergers, and is once again currently migrating from the provincial to the national Department of Higher Education and Training, as a result of external political requirements. The merges were between traditional technical colleges, colleges of education and manpower centres to form 50 mega TEVT colleges with multiple campuses. These external changes have brought about not only stress related to job insecurity, but also changes in structures and organograms, and the way the college goes about its daily business. These external changes at a structural and political level are reflected in the college management, governance and operational levels. As an open system, small changes elsewhere in the sector have or may not have, due to unpredictability, large changes within the college system. Secondly, Burke and Bradford’s definition is based on humanistic values that support my study, as reflected in my research question: “How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current toxicity which is being experienced every day?” One of the ways in which I expect to add value and to contribute

to organisational wellness is to address life-enhancing values for myself, the staff, and the institution, in order to reduce the toxicity experienced in the workplace where I work.

However, what I was looking for in a theory or model for doing OD could not be satisfied by classical and neoclassical human relations organisation theory, or by OD theories as advanced by Burke and Bradford (2005) or by Anderson (2013), or by what is known as “diagnostic” OD. The premise on which diagnostic OD rests is that all organisations need valid data in order for a diagnosis to be made as to how to bring about change. Hence a change agent must generate such data, and validate the data as if the data correlates with a real world outside the organisation, which is perceived as the deeper ‘real’ world when compared with what is observable at surface level within the organisation. Beckhard and Argyris’ theoretical orientation fits this category of OD, by stressing the validity of data needed in OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2009).

I also agree with Bushe and Marshak (2009) that the newer theoretical orientations within the post-positivist paradigm, such as social constructionism, complexity theory, and critical theory, are under-represented in the OD literature when compared to other fields of research. What is exciting in current OD debate is the emergence of dialogic organisational development since the turn of this century. What I have found in the literature is an OD alternative to both the classical, closed system, as espoused by the machine metaphor, and the neoclassical biological (living being) metaphor of an open system organisation. Dialogic organisation theory is driven by post-positivist constructivist and interpretive paradigms (Bushe & Marshak, 2009).

One of the forerunners, from the late 1990s, of dialogic organisational development is Owen (2008), who was the “first OD theorist to propose that environments of rapid change and complexity require the ability to guide self-organizing transformation in self and systems” (Bushe & Marshak, 2014:16). From this quote it is easy to see how the dialogic theory of OD is influenced by complexity theory, a theory which I will examine more fully at the end of this chapter. In engaging in dialogic OD, it is important to create a space that allows what is transforming to transform. This created safe environment for communication is what Owen (2008:82) called an open space – a “calm space”, which is found between what was and what is in the process of becoming. In action research, the action learning set often operates within this space as participants in the research cycle. The open space is not a literal space or location, but a space for dialogue. The emphasis is on learning and changing mindsets and ways of thinking, by allowing diverse and different conversations to be voiced. Within this space, an emergent construction of knowledge takes place, through disruption, differentiation, and coherence (Bushe & Marshak, 2014). The dialogic organisational development theory stresses

that there cannot be in OD planning any predetermined outcomes that can be predicted, as organisations are complex systems, continually in flux, stable and unstable at the same time. It is the dialogue, the diverse interaction, the challenging of ideas, and the listening to other narratives that leads to a change of mind, a change of thinking, which is a precondition for behavioural change. Hence, Marshak and Bushe (2013:1) refer to OD's view of organisations as

dialogical systems where individual, group, and organizational actions result from socially constructed realities created and sustained by the prevailing narratives, stories, metaphors, and conversations through which people make meaning about their experiences. From this perspective change results from changing the conversations that shape everyday thinking and behavior by involving more different voices, altering how and which people engage with each other.

The influence of constructivist and interpretive paradigms is evident from the above quote. I find it useful to see how, from an ontological perspective, there is no objective reality apart from it being there, existing, unless it was created within a social context. Thus the toxicity that is experienced within the college is not in and of itself a reality, but is created by employees, be they managers or subordinates, toxic managers or toxic followers. If the toxicity is socially constructed by people, then people can create a detoxified workplace, a positive, healthy work culture.

I have utilised and adapted Bushe and Marshak's (2014; 2009:357) table, which compares diagnostic OD with dialogic OD, to clearly summarise some of the emphases that I have been referring to thus far such as chaos and complexity theories, values and toxicity and epistemological and ontological underpinnings of my methodology.

**Table 3.1: A comparison of diagnostic and dialogic OD (adapted from Bushe & Marshak, 2009:357)**

	<b>Diagnostic OD</b>	<b>Dialogic OD</b>
Influenced by	Classical science, positivism, and modernist philosophy	Interpretive approaches, social constructionism, critical and postmodern philosophy
Dominant organisational construct	Organisations are like <i>machines</i> or living systems	Organisations are meaning-making systems <i>that are self-adaptive and self-organising</i>
Ontology and epistemology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reality is an objective fact</li> <li>• There is a single reality</li> <li>• Truth is transcendent and discoverable</li> <li>• Reality can be discovered using rational and analytical processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reality is socially constructed</li> <li>• There are multiple realities</li> <li>• Truth is imminent and emerges from the situation</li> <li>• Reality is negotiated and may involve power and political processes</li> </ul>
Constructs of change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usually teleological</li> <li>• Collecting and applying valid data using objective problem-solving methods leads to change</li> <li>• Change can be created, planned, and managed</li> <li>• <i>Validation and transference of data from one context to another</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often dialogical or dialectical</li> <li>• Creating containers and processes to produce generative ideas leads to change</li> <li>• Change can be encouraged, but is mainly self-organising</li> <li>• Change may be continuous and/or cyclical</li> <li>• Change follows a process of disruption, differentiation, and coherence</li> </ul>
Focus of change	Emphasis on changing behaviour and what people do	Emphasis on changing mindsets and what people think

OD as a practice utilising change interventions in a systematic way, in order to develop and improve both the employees and the organisation, operates from a values base. McLean (2006:28) highlights six key values that guide the OD practice:

- Respect and inclusion – to equally value the perspectives and opinions of everyone.
- Collaboration – to build win-win relationships in the organisation.
- Authenticity – to help people behave congruently with their espoused values.
- Self-awareness – to be committed to developing self-awareness and interpersonal skills within the organisation.
- Empowerment – to focus on helping everyone in the client organisation increase their individual level of autonomy and sense of personal power and courage, in order to enhance productivity and elevate employee morale.
- Democracy and social justice – the belief that people will support those things which they have had a hand in shaping, that the human spirit is elevated by pursuing democratic principles.

These values are important to my inquiry, as they are aligned with my personal values. Hence, by engaging in a living theory of organisational development, I will experience self-fulfilment, which is important in research. Research is not only about the production of literature that contributes to the academy, nor is it only about facilitating change at a practical organisational level, as in my case; it is about self-development which is consistent with the goals of organisational development, namely to change/develop employees, and to change/develop the organisation (the college, in my case). The purpose of engaging in organisational development is to facilitate change and to improve my own wellness and the wellness of those victims of toxicity.

### **3.3 Wellness, well-being, and health**

There is no shortage of definitions for the concept of wellness, nor is there consensus as to whom the concept can be traced to. However, most literature studies indicate that Halbert Dunn in the early 1960s was seen as the father of the wellness movement (Fair, 2010), when he published his radio talks of the late 1950s in book form (Dunn, 1961). The World Health Organization's definition of health is probably one of the most quoted definitions of health, because it did two things: (1) it broadened the concept of health, to include the social and mental components of health, and (2) it stressed the positive state of well-being apart from disease, by stating that "[h]ealth is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (World Health Organization, 1946:100). This definition marked the beginning of a more holistic approach to defining health. At the time of this

definition the medical, biological, mechanistic view of man as a biophysical organism, at best a closed system, dominated the Western medical world (Kirsten, Van der Walt & Viljoen, 2009). Body parts, such as the organs (the heart, the lungs, the brain), and the systems of the body, such as the nervous, circulatory, and digestive systems, were studied, diagnosed, and treated apart from other systems, as well as external environmental factors. The body was reduced to its parts, influenced by Descartes's idea of reductionism; this is a position which has continued to today, and it is questioned whether the health sciences have made a paradigm shift away from this biomedical approach (Cordon, 2013; Kirsten *et al.*, 2009). Hence, what is noticeable in defining wellness is that there appear to be two expressions of wellness, which have developed in chronological sequence. The first expression of wellness is rooted in the physical bio-health framework, for example that of Dunn (1961), Travis (Travis and Ryan 1981, [2004]), and Ardell (1984), while the second, more recent, expression of wellness is rooted in a psychological clinical framework, for example Myers, Sweeney and Witner (2000). This does not mean that there are no overlaps between the physical dimension and the psychological dimension, but it is rather a case of different emphasis.

According to positive psychology, health is much more than the absence of illness, sickness, or disease – it is an excellence of positive health. It is not a matter of “coping and adaptation, but positive growth” (Compton & Hoffman, 2013:128). Positive health can be measured against daily functionality, in other words daily tasks, or biological markers that are physically measurable, such as blood pressure and blood sugar levels, and subjective well-being, which includes the emotions, optimism, and a zest for life (Seligman, 2008). Even at the start of this 21st century, the emphasis was still on the biomedical aspects of health (Kirsten *et al.*, 2009). I would agree with Connolly and Myers (2003) that even when there is a holistic attempt to unite both the physical, mental and spiritual dimensions of health, in business organisations health is generally limited to the biophysical concept of health. Although I agree with Kirsten *et al.* (2009:6) that there are differences between the concepts of health, wellness, and well-being, and that these terms should be kept separate and not be used interchangeably, I have found that this is not the case in practice. When I speak about health, I am referring to it in a holistic way, covering physical, mental, social, spiritual and environmental aspects of being positively healthy, and not just the absence of disease, or dis-ease, in the case of spiritual and mental health. In addition when I speak about wellness, I am referring to a subjective, perceived state of being, where optimal health, physical, mental, social, spiritual and environmental, are experienced by an individual. I refer to well-being as the positive dimension of functioning fully and optimally with regard to physical, mental, social, spiritual and environmental elements of positive health. In this way, I see “health” as an umbrella term for what is perceived and experienced – wellness that allows positive functionality – well-being.

Optimal wellness has been defined as “[a]n integrated method of functioning which is orientated toward maximizing the potential of which the individual is capable, within the environment which she (or he) is functioning” (Dunn, 1961:6). It is obvious from this definition that one of the variables for wellness is the environment. I am not so much interested in the physical environment of an organisation as I am in the culture and structures of the organisation, including the social and psychological aspects of relationships within the organisation, which, in my case, is the college where I work, and external environmental factors, such as social, economic and political influences that are brought into the workplace by the employees, and that may impact upon the health and wellness of colleagues within the organisation. An organisation is made up of a network of relationships. It is these relationships, as well as the systems and structures that I have noticed in the college where I work, that are toxic, and they thus negatively affect the potential of employees to fully experience wellness. Wellness and health are the reverse side of the toxic triangle (namely toxic leaders, toxic followers, and toxic environments) that my colleagues and I experience in the TVET college where I work.

With this as background, the question arises as to what models or theories of health, well-being, and wellness I can use as a theoretical framework to inform my inquiry and answer my research question. Most models are diagrammatically represented as triangles and circles, an exception being Travis’s (Travis *et.al.* 2004) illness-wellness continuum. The left extreme of the continuum represents premature death, while the right extreme represents high-level wellness. The understanding is that during a lifespan, an individual fluctuates along the line, depending on whether there are signs, symptoms, or evidence of illness or disability, which would make them move left on the continuum, or whether there are indications of well-being or positive healthy functionality, which would make them move right on the continuum.

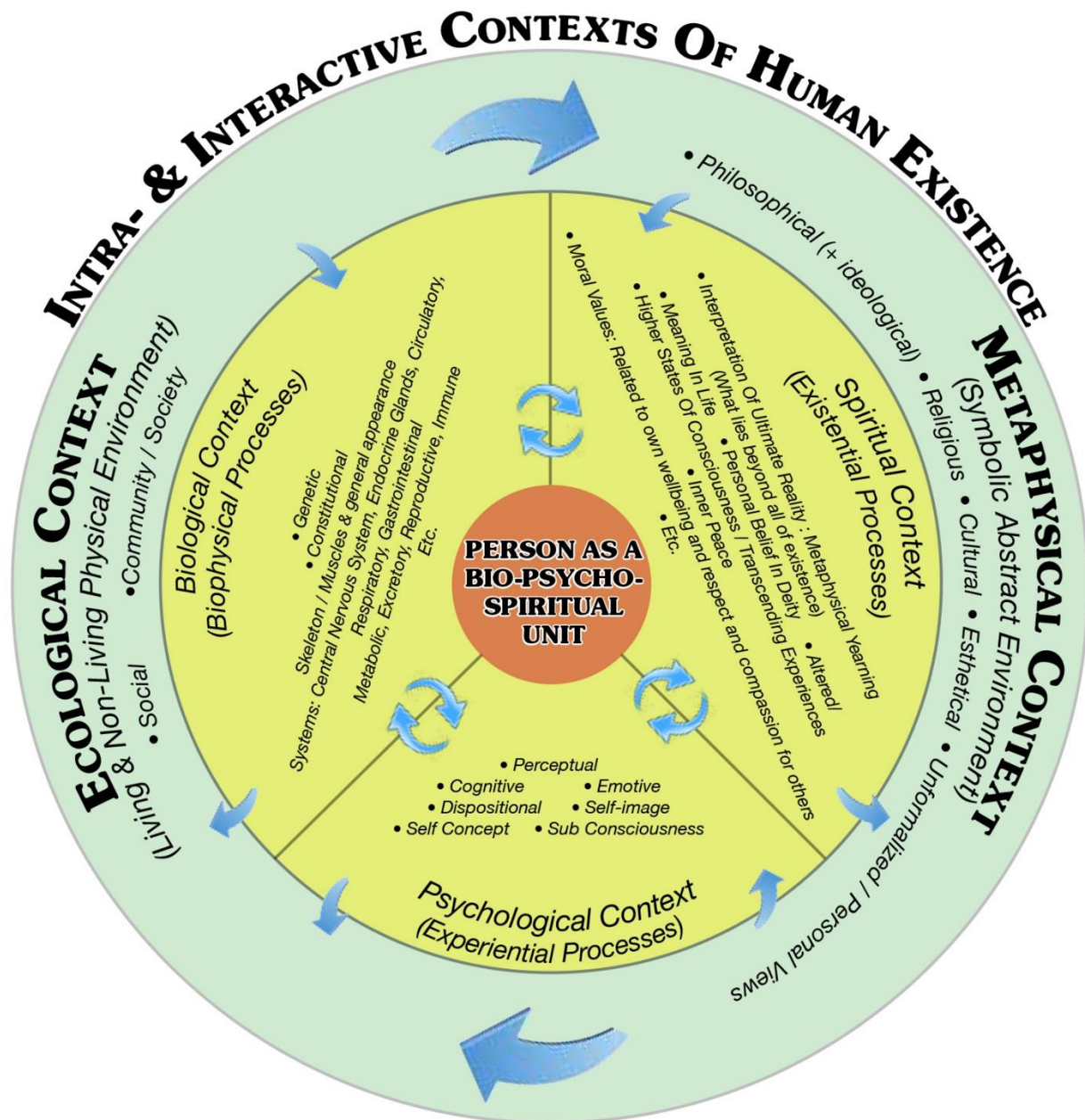
Hettler (1979) developed a model of healthy functioning, which was influenced by Ardell (1977), who had developed several wellness models. The first model that he developed was a five-dimensional model consisting of a circle with five categories, namely self-respect, physical fitness, stress management, environmental sensitivity, and nutritional awareness. This was followed by his revised model, consisting of a circle with six dimensions of wellness, namely self-responsibility, relationship dynamics, meaning and purpose, nutritional awareness, physical fitness, and emotional intelligence (Ardell, 1982). Hettler’s (1979) six-dimensional model of wellness, consisting of a hexagon with six triangles, reflects Ardell’s thinking, and included the following dimensions: intellectual, occupational, physical, social, spiritual, and emotional. Later, Ardell (2009) developed his models into a reduced triad, consisting of three domains, namely a physical, a mental, and a meaning/purpose domain.

In 1991 and 1992, Witner and Sweeney developed their “Wheel of Wellness”, which had its origins in psychological counselling theory (Myers & Sweeney, 2007:2; Sweeney & Witner, 1991; Witner & Sweeney, 1992). This model was revised and published in 2000, with additional input by Myers (Myers *et al.*, 2000), and it included five life tasks, namely spirituality, self-regulation, work, friendship, and love. At the centre of the model was spirituality, with 12 spokes radiating from it, representing various life tasks. This psychological model was influenced by Adler’s (1999) “individual psychology”, and is one of the first models to be ecological in nature, as it responds to life forces outside of the individual that may have a bearing on the wellness of the individual, such as the media and government (Myers & Sweeney, 2007:1). This is an important development, for two reasons. The first reason is its Adlerian influence, and the second reason is the ecological dimension in the model, as the model signals the beginning of a paradigm shift, as systems thinking is evident in the composition of the model. I agree with Myers and Sweeney (2007:1) that Adler was “emphatic in his belief in the unity and indivisibility of the self, observing that we are more than the sum of our parts and cannot be divided” which was a precursor to gestalt psychology.

Working within the systems paradigm, Kirsten *et al.* (2009) devised an anthropological ecosystemic model, or approach, that takes into account the external influences that may have a bearing on the individual’s health, well-being, and wellness. The ecological context consists of the living and non-living physical environment, and may include social, societal and community influences. This context is an important consideration, because in a work environment, such as that of the college where I work, the education system, policies, structures, and legislation may impact upon employees’ wellness. The anthropological ecosystemic approach in the model also includes the metaphysical properties of ideologies, religions, cultures, and aesthetic and personal views (Kirsten *et al.*, 2009:3). This is appealing to me as an HR manager, who has to interact with staff, who cannot be broken down into parts and analysed, but, rather, who at the same time that they are part of the college, are also part of the wider South African community, with all its religious, cultural and ideological differences. When staff enter the doors of the college, they do not leave behind the influences of their communities in particular and society in general. This is the perceived dilemma of organisational development, as was noted earlier in the chapter, namely that organisations change as individuals change, but if the ecological and metaphysical elements external to the organisation are not changing, then there would be little success in terms of organisational change. However, working in systems thinking, this logic is flawed, as a small degree of change in one area has a change effect in another area, and all change, whether internal or external, is unpredictable. Furthermore, change is a continual flux of

dynamic energy forces that is taking place, whether we are aware of it or not. Hence the saying is valid that the only constant is change.

However, I have adapted the diagrammatic representation of the systemic model, so as to strengthen the appeal of the model to the systems thinking of complexity and chaos. As the diagram stands, unaltered, the impression is created of three contexts, separate from each other under the banner of a whole person as a bio-psycho-spiritual unit which seems to compartmentalise rather than unify the person into a single entity I do not think this was the way Kirsten et al. (2009) conceptualised their model, otherwise the internal logic of systems thinking that underpins their model would fall flat. To prevent this problem, I have shown a circular movement of energy flow that incorporates all three contexts, but is seamless, allowing for continuous interaction between the different contexts at the same time. This anthropological ecosystemic model was used by Meyer (2011) in her study of the nature and impact of psychological violence on the health of staff members at the college where I work. My adapted version of Kirsten et al.'s (2009) model is depicted in Figure 3.1 below.



**Figure 3.1: A holistic ecosystemic view of the health, well-being, and wellness of the human being (adapted from Kirsten *et al.*, 2009)**

Henning and Cilliers (2012) also developed a psychodynamic wellness model from a systems (chaos theory) and positive psychology approach, with 39 fractal themes. While this model is appealing due to its embedded position within chaos theory, to which I hold strongly, it would be more useful for a psychological inquiry, and not for a living theory of organisational development.

I have referred to these models to demonstrate that through the use of various geometric figures, such as circles, hexagons, or triangles, the authors moved from a health continuum approach, which distinguishes disease, or illness, from health, as two poles, to an inclusive, more holistic approach that takes into account the whole person, as a physical, mental, social, psychological, and environmental living being, capable of enjoying well-being by virtue of their own perceptions and choices. The way I see wellness is influenced by the values system I live by.

### **3.4 Values theory**

Schwartz (2012:1) makes a valuable contribution to this inquiry, when he indicates that values, in the view of the sociologists Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, “were crucial for explaining social and personal organization and change”. This position highlights the importance of studying values in relationship to people and organisations as social constructs. However, it is as important now as it was then (Branson, 2008) to link values to organisational change, as values serve as motivators for attitudes, behaviours, and changes at a personal and an organisational level. I concur with Bourne and Jenkins (2013:496) that “values have a long reach and a wide span of influence on critical processes and characteristics in organisations”, and there can be no organisational change without personal change of employees, be it change in their attitudes, beliefs, or values.

Solomons and Fataar (2011:225) contend that “‘values’ is a fluid concept”, meaning different things to different people, and that the “lack of clarity leaves room for speculation and misinterpretation”. As early as 1972, Pat Hutcheon identified the confusion associated with the concept of values and sought to bring clarity to the debate by clarifying eight approaches that some scholars have used to interpret values, namely values as group norms (Kolb), values as cultural ideals (Rokeach), values as assessments of behaviour or actions (Landes), values as beliefs (Albrecht), values as objects, although not tangible but shared in the public domain (Turner), and as patterns of behaviour (Klucholn) (Hutcheon, 1972). One of the more popular definitions of values is that of Rokeach (1973:5), who defines a value as “an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence”. A more recent definition is that of Friedman, Kahn and Borning (2006:349), who have the simplest of definitions when they state that “[a] value refers to what a person or a group of people consider important in life”. Cheng and Fleischmann’s (2010:23) definition builds on Friedman et al.’s (2006) definition, when they define values as “guiding principles of what people consider important in life”.

What becomes clear from the literature is that values are defined as ends (teleological end-states), or means, as modes of behaviour, or as both. This two-pronged approach is captured by Martin (2011:68), when he offers a working definition of human values that I believe is helpful, when he states that human values “denote a person’s or society’s deep preferences and commitments for particular end-states of existence or modes of behaviour”, and that they “motivate our choices and judgements across the full range of human situations, and concern both mastery (or competence) and ethics (or morality)”. Wood’s (2013) approach is that values guide our decision making, as they are ideas that are entrenched in what we think is right or wrong. Whitehead (1989) emphasises that our values, when enacted in our life, become standards of judgement in our life. It’s a matter of ‘walking the talk’. For example, if caring is a value that I uphold and cherish, then, in my actions in the public square, I must be a caring individual in reality, and not just be seen to be caring. Thus, caring, as a value that I have, is confirmed through the actions that I display in caring. To put it differently, my values, who I am, my being, my ontology, is not defined by what I say, but by what I do and what I am – my behaviour. A biblical metaphor for these ideas is simply that I am known by my ‘fruit’.

The following essential characteristics of values have been identified by Smith and Schwartz (1997:3213), and they are useful in my context, both as a researcher and as an HRD manager:

1. Values are beliefs. But they are not objective, ‘cold’ ideas. Rather, when values are activated, they become infused with feeling.
2. Values refer to desirable goals (e.g., equality), and to the modes of conduct that promote these goals (e.g., fairness, helpfulness).
3. Values transcend specific actions and situations. Obedience, for example, is relevant at work or in school, in sport or in business, with family, friends, or strangers.
4. Values serve as standards to guide the selection or evaluation of behaviour, people, and events.
5. Values are ordered by their importance relative to one another. The ordered set of values forms a system of value priorities. Cultures and individuals can be characterised by their systems of value priorities (Smith & Schwartz, 1997:3213).

The personal values that I espouse, on reflection, have been part of my life from early childhood, as I was raised in a middle-class Christian family, where respect, tolerance, caring, responsibility, and sharing were norms that were lived by. Living in a country that entrenched apartheid practices, I was quickly taught tolerance by my mother of Irish descent, that “there is good and bad in every nation”, and that skin colour does not determine your worth, but rather that being fully human does, demonstrated in showing compassion for others. Between the

ages of 10 and 14 I spent most weekends and holidays with very wealthy Jewish friends on their dairy farm. During the week, their three children boarded with us in town. My mother, who was only 1.45 metres tall, held her ground, and there was no such thing as backchat in our home, especially at dinner table. Backchat at table ended up with the perpetrator excused from table without being able to finish your meal. My father was reserved, a draughtsman by trade, and he lectured part-time at a technical college in the evening. In his words he didn't suffer fools lightly, meaning that he was irritated by people who were not prepared to think before they spoke. He always insisted that I think before I did or said anything foolish. He died of cancer when I was 14. A relative informed me of his death by phone, stating "You are on your own now; you must look after your mother". Those words had an impact on my sense of responsibility, and I strove in every way to meet those expectations by taking care for my mother.

Today, too, I expect others to be accountable and responsible for their actions. My learning to be respectful towards others is shown by how I was taught that, when sitting on a bus, one must give up one's seat for an elder, without hesitation, and that one must greet everyone in public places, whether one knows the person or not. The slogans "Manners maketh the man" and "It costs nothing to say thank you and please" were drummed into me. I was also raised to care for those less fortunate than myself, by offering a helping hand. Our neighbour was not able to go shopping due to her age and ill health, and I would always be required to ask her if she needed anything from the shops when we went to town. I can hear my mother's voice as I write this: "Tell the truth, and shame the Devil", as she taught me that it was far better to own up, take responsibility, and be a 'man' than to tell a lie or cop out. With my mother, the punishment always became far worse if one did not accept responsibility for one's actions. I believe that I learned and absorbed these values, and later as an adult adopted them as my own values and life principles. These goals colour my behaviour and the behaviour that I expect of others in the workplace, as both end goals and as guiding principles. In other words these values are what I strive for and are simultaneously the means, the standards that direct my path to those very goals.

I turn now to organisational values. When I apply the above understanding of values to the values of my college, as stated on paper, as part of the vision and mission statement, it is evident that the values of the college are not acted out, that they are not dynamic living, guiding principles. In fact, they do not take on a life of their own that can be noticed by internal or external clients. Wood (2013:56) hits the nail on the head when she asserts that "values remain abstract unless we make a conscious decision to live them out". O'Neil and Horne (2012:2) make the point that "portraying values in writing is not difficult; it is the internalization of

organization values that seems to be the problem". The value statements of the college where I work, which I cited in chapter 1, and which are made public on the college website, include accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, quality, redress of educational opportunities, accessibility, and sustainable development.<sup>6</sup> These value statements (Annexure P) have been framed and are displayed for all to see at each campus and at the corporate centre, and they are published in our annual reports and in our student calendars. However, while we may be proud to have them in print, it can be argued that some of the college's value statements have nothing to do with values at all, such as "redress of educational opportunities". In fact, if these stated values were to be used as standards of judgement to evaluate the culture of the college, the college would come up short as they are not lived out in the workplace.

One of the common OD practices is to align personal values with work values, in order to reach organisational goals, job satisfaction, and positive employee attitudes, to improve team work, and to strengthen relationships within the organisation (Branson, 2008:381). In this way, organisational values perform a galvanising function, bringing all employees together with a common purpose, and improving productivity. When there is a common goal, espoused organisational values are sometimes referred to as shared values, and, as such, these values improve worker engagement and participation. It may be argued that it is not the values themselves that bring about the behaviour of employees, but the desire of employees to find meaning and fulfilment in their work (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2006). This is achieved by adopting a shared values approach, where the values of the employees and those of the organisation are aligned. Due to the fact that organisational values impinge upon employee behaviour, it can be argued that values are part and parcel of the culture of the organisation (Martin, 2006). By "organisational culture", I simply mean "how things are done around here", in other words the habitual patterns of observable behaviour. Schein (2010:17) defined organisational culture as

[a] pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group has learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

Schein (2010) preferred to use the term "shared basic assumptions" rather than the term "values", simply because he sees assumptions as non-negotiable beliefs that cannot be argued about. While the organisational culture may be observable through artefacts and employee behaviour, the causes, influences, beliefs, and values associated with the culture often lie beneath the observable phenomena that drive the process. Having established that in organisations, values as assumptions drive cultural processes (Schein, 1992), it is not

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<sup>6</sup> To ensure confidentiality, the website address and name of the college are not supplied as a reference.

surprising at a management level, where ethical leadership is important, to see a move away from management by objectives (MBO) to management by values (MBV), popularised through the work of Blanchard and O'Connor (2003) and Schnebel and Bienert (2004). In an MBV approach, three phases are important: (1) defining values, (2) communicating the values, and (3) aligning the values. I like this approach, and I understand where Schein (1992) and Blanchard *et.al* (Blanchard and O'Connor, 2003) are coming from when they assert that values are driven from the top down in organisations.

However, I want to stress that my concern is that this approach may reduce employees to passive recipients of the values or assumptions of top management. If this is so, then organisational change is impeded, and in my college the toxicity would remain intact. My critical consciousness challenges the status quo of power hegemony among leaders who may be toxic and contribute negatively to the wellness of the organisation, making it dysfunctional or that may adversely affect the wellness of employees. Hence the research question; "How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current climate of toxicity which is experienced every day?". In order to answer this question, I must understand, address, and challenge the organisation's value systems, and I need to find a theoretical framework in order to do this. It seems to me that following an MBV approach that entrenches a values-driven organisation is such a start (Landrum, Gardner & Boje, 2013). A values-driven organisation (Barrett, 2006) is a systems approach that takes into consideration the various values that employees have based on their needs.

Barrett (2014:3) defines values as "a shorthand method of describing what is important to us individually or collectively (as an organization, community or nation) at any given moment in time". Hence, his point of departure is that values are not fixed, but can fluctuate, change, develop, or be abandoned at any time, as they are a reflection of the needs of the individual, the community, or the nation. In this sense, Barrett can speak of situational values (2014:10), as he makes the case that as the employee and the organisation develop, so do their needs. These needs impact upon their values and what they stand for, or are prepared to fight for, at any given moment. Hence, in a college such as the one where I work, I must expect a diversity of values, and even those that are common will be weighted differently in terms of importance and order of priority. I will draw on values-driven organisation theory, rather than employ Schwartz's (2012) value theory, which is extensively used in values research. I do so for two reasons. Firstly, although Schwartz's value theory has been confirmed to be culturally neutral, in my college in South Africa alone, we have over 10 different cultural groups of employees, so that I am hesitant to use Schwartz's value theory in a culturally heterogeneous institution. Secondly,

as I am working in a qualitative study, I wish to move away from any quantitative approaches. I find that I can align myself in part with the Corporate Character Ethical Value Matrix (CC-EVM) framework, which is a two-type by three-target matrix, originating from Schwartz and Josephson (Showalter, 2009), simply to delimit my research study to workable categories that accommodate organisational values. The CC-EVM framework captures the six values (hence the two type X three type target) that should be incorporated into a business code of ethics; trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.

Finally, when dealing with a values-driven approach, I must be wary of what Cha and Edmondson (2006:71) refer to as the “hypocrisy attribution” dynamic, and “disenchantment” by employees in a values-driven organisation. If there is incongruence between the understanding of the leaders, on the one hand, and the perceptions and interpretations of values of the employees, on the other hand, the behaviour of the leaders is seen as hypocritical. This dynamic leads to attribution of blame. Flowing from this attribution of hypocrisy to the leadership, who in the eyes of the employees has broken the code of the espoused organisational values, is a feeling of disenchantment. This disenchantment can be experienced as disappointment, anger, or a breach of trust, which results in negative emotions being displayed by employees, which, in turn, results in poor work performance, lack of engagement, and absenteeism. In this regard, being a values-driven organisation requires consistency, shared values, and commitment to ethical decision making on the part of all employees to overcome any form of hypocrisy in the workplace.

### **3.5 Toxicity model**

One of the criticisms of organisation theory in the 1990s was the fact that little time was devoted to emotions in the workplace (Van Tonder, 2004:29). This was due to the psychological understanding that organisations were like machines, that they acted like machines, and that they could be controlled, manipulated, and fixed like machines. One of the first scholars to draw attention to the need for an understanding of feelings and emotions in the workplace was Fineman (1993). Interpreting organisations from a psychological perspective brought a change of focus to how organisations were spoken about, from a previous perspective of pathology. The language changed, so that organisations were spoken about as being “dysfunctional”, “destructive”, “depressive”, “compulsive”, and “schizoid”, and leadership was referred to as “suspicious” and “narcissistic” (Van Tonder, 2004:31). Whicker (1996) was the first scholar to coin the phrase “toxic leaders”, and thereafter a host of titles appeared, such as *The allure of toxic leaders* (Lipman—Blumen, 2005), *Transforming toxic leaders* (Goldman, 2009), *Surviving the toxic workplace* (Durre, 2010), *The toxic workplace!* (Kusy and Holloway, 2009), *Coping with toxic managers, Subordinates and other difficult people and toxic management styles* (Lubit,

2004), *Toxic emotions at work* (Frost, 2007), *The no asshole rule: building a civilised workplace and surviving one that isn't* (Sutton, 2010), to name but a few.

Toxic leaders have been defined by Lipman-Blumen (2005:2) as “individuals who, by virtue of their destructive behaviours and their dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on the individuals, groups, organizations, communities and even nations they lead”. This approach to defining toxic leaders follows the traits approach, where the emphasis is on the characteristics of such individuals. Kusy and Holloway (2009:4) take a different approach, in that they define a toxic individual as “anyone who demonstrates a pattern of counterproductive work behaviours that debilitate individuals, teams, and even organizations over the long term”. In this last definition, the emphasis is on function, and not traits, but either way, the outcome, or effect, of toxicity is hurt, or harm, to individuals or organisations. The question that arises is whether emotional toxicity is the same as psychological violence, which is more commonly referred to as bullying. Tavanti (2011:131) goes so far as to assert that “toxic bullies”, as toxic leaders, manage by fear, and in their interpersonal relationships display “bullying dynamics”; he thus links toxicity to bullying behaviour. While it is true that one of the pathologies of both bullies and toxic leaders/managers is narcissism, it is, in my opinion, incorrect to equate the two categories, for the following reason. One of the characteristics that defines a bully is the singling out of an individual or group, with the premeditated purpose of bullying that individual or group. Toxic leadership or managers, on the other hand, generally lack the premeditated component (this is mostly the case, but they can have this element), and their behaviour is characterised more by a lack of thought or care for how their behaviour may impact upon others. It is as if they do not care for, or take into account, or respect, the lives of others. There are always exceptions to the rule, and hence I would agree that bullying, or ‘mobbing’, if done by a group, falls within the category of toxic behaviours, so that where a bully operates and displays bullying tactics, that environment can be called toxic.

Organisational toxicity has been defined as “the widespread, intense, energy-sapping negative emotion that disconnects people from their jobs, co-workers, and organizations” (Maitlis, 2008:1204). Toxic workplaces suffering from “corporate narcissism”, which affects the health and emotional well-being of employees, have been identified where mediocrity is rewarded, employees fear reprisal for challenging management decisions, thereby losing their voices, staff turnover is high, and leaders lose their tempers, shout and throw tantrums, and use obscenities (Gilbert, Carr-Ruffino, Ivancevich & Konopaske, 2012:30). In tracing the sources of toxic behaviour displayed by bosses in organisations, Frost (2004) associated “seven deadly ‘In’s” with toxic bosses, namely intention, incompetence, infidelity, insensitivity, intrusion, institutional (forces), and inevitability. What this means is that some toxic behaviour (bullying) is intentional,

where it is premeditated, where hurt is directed towards a victim. Some toxic leaders, or bosses, lack people skills, are indecisive, and micromanage their subordinates, to a degree that employees feel policed. Micromanagement relates to a manager not allowing the subordinates space to complete the tasks on their own. The manager in this case is constantly checking every minute detail on a continual basis for deviations or mistakes. Some managers display infidelity, by letting their employees down, breaking promises, not delivering on agreements, or simply not being honest. Toxic bosses lack empathy, they cannot relate to the emotional needs of their subordinates, and they cannot really care about how their employees feel. Toxic bosses cannot distinguish between their employees' private lives and their work lives, and they make such great demands on their employees that they intrude upon the private lives of their employees, by overloading them with work, which will need to be completed outside working hours, at home. Policies or expectations that are either ethically wrong or even contrary to legislation that are expected to be followed by employees constitute institutional forces at play that cause toxicity at work. Finally, emotional pain, hurt, and upheaval can be caused by mergers, downsizing, and retrenchment, which are inevitable, but are not managed with sensitivity by toxic bosses. Often the reason for the above behaviour of toxic bosses is their own incompetence to manage their divisions properly. Their own deficiencies, anger and incompetence is projected on to their subordinates.

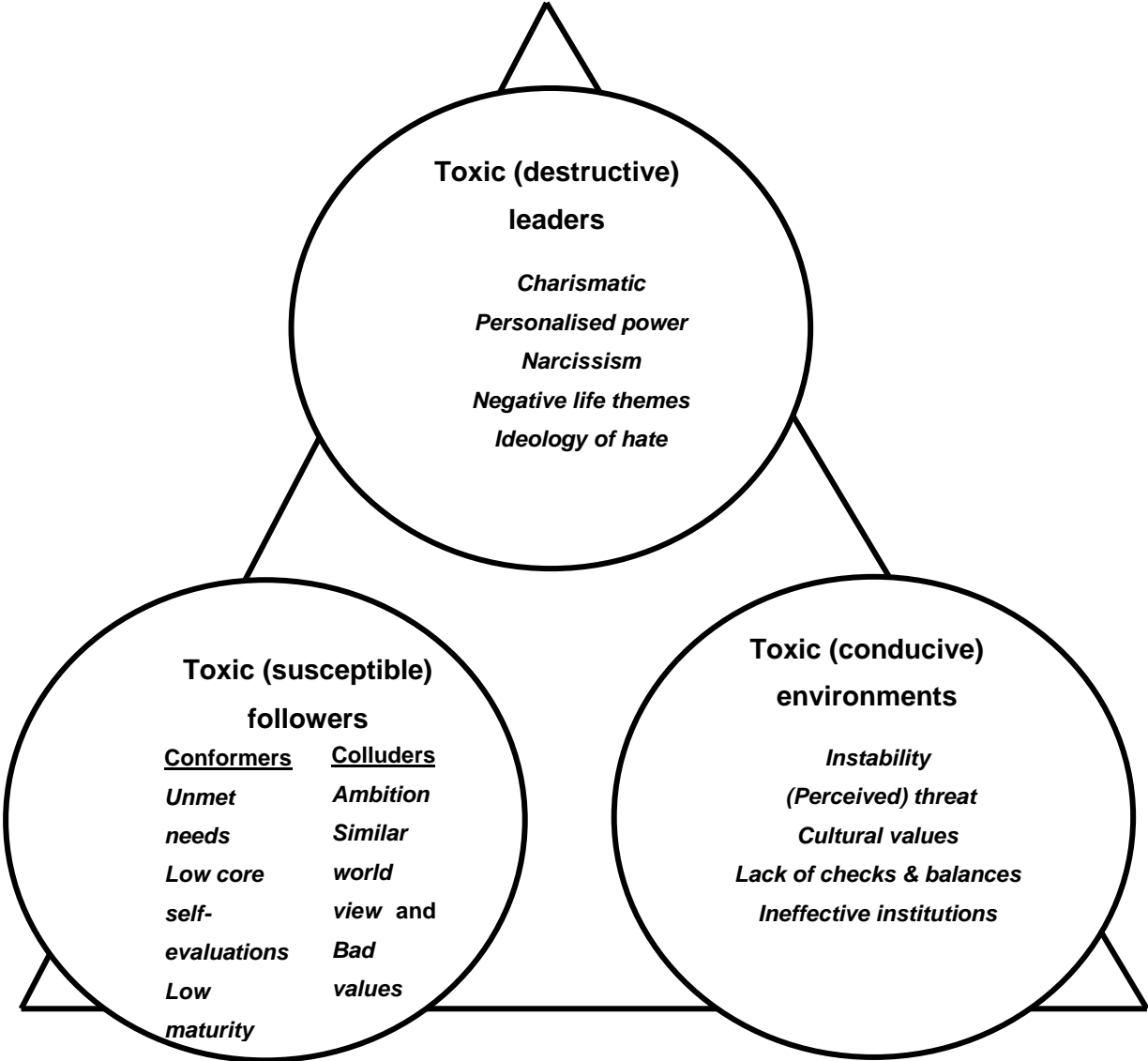
It is not only organisations and leaders that are described in the literature as toxic, but followers also (Furnham, 2010:23; Johnson, 2014:43; Walton, 2008:14). Toxic followers are those employees who may victimise their supervisors or managers, either individually or as a group, in the form of 'mobbing'. This may take the form of gossiping, slandering, or sabotaging the programmes and deliverables of their leaders, and creating a culture of 'us and them'. Toxic followers include staff that support bullying tactics by toxic managers for their own benefit. Often by supporting toxic leaders fully, toxic followers deflect negative attention away from themselves, or they curry favour for themselves with toxic managers. This type of activity is divisive, and it makes the organisation dysfunctional. Thoroughgood, Padilla, Hunter and Tate (2012) refer to toxic followers as susceptible followers, rather than as toxic followers (Thoroughgood *et al.*, 2012). Thoroughgood *et al.* (2012:12) identify five types of susceptible followers, namely authoritarians, lost souls, bystanders, opportunists, and acolytes, who each have their own peculiar attributes and characteristics. There are toxic followers categorised as conformists who are aware of themselves being victimised and bullied or are witness to this type of behaviour happening to their peers but are too afraid to speak out against the toxic bosses. They conform to the system so as not to offend anyone even when they are experiencing emotional dissonance as they see the harm and hurt being experienced by fellow colleagues. A further category is that of colluders. The difference between the two categories is

that conformists' behaviour is a reaction to the toxic behaviour of their leaders, while colluders have their own dark personalities, and their behaviour replicates that of destructive toxic leaders. While conformists show no active part in bullying or slandering their colleagues, the colluders are those who collude with and take an active part in supporting toxic bosses in their bullying tactics. These colluders are noted for tattle tailing, spreading rumours, gossiping and victimising fellow colleagues with the full knowledge of their managers and leaders.

In this study I will make use of Thoroughgood et al.'s (2012) susceptible circle model of followers that I have renamed toxic followers and alluded to in the preceding paragraph, as it offers a model for understanding how employees are drawn into becoming toxic followers in their organisation. However, I will also utilise the toxic triangle model (see fig. 3.2 below) developed by Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser (2007), as the susceptible circle model and the toxic triangle model overlap with, and enrich, each other. This is not surprising, as Padilla is one of the authors in the development of both models. Hence, my choice is based on a very strong model of understanding toxicity in the college. The toxic triangle model, depicted in Figure 3.2 below, highlights the apex position of an equilateral triangle as occupied by destructive leaders, who may be full of charm and charismatic in their leadership style, but function from a pathological base characterised by narcissism. These leaders are supported by susceptible followers, and I have adapted the triangle to include the conformist and the colluder categories from the susceptible circle model (Thoroughgood *et al.*, 2012) into Padilla's toxic triangle. The third angle of the triangle is occupied by conducive environments, which speaks to contextual factors (Thoroughgood, Hunter & Sawyer, 2010), such as the organisational culture, financial health, organisational structures, policies (or the lack thereof), which create a favourable climate for destructive toxic leaders and toxic, or susceptible, followers to run amok, resulting in organisational dysfunctionality and a decline in the health and wellness of employees as bio-psycho-spiritual beings, as per the wellness model that I have adopted for this study.

I have renamed one of the three angles of the triangle "toxic leaders", rather than "destructive leaders", as I want the emphasis to be placed on the psychological source of the problem, rather than on the function. The function is a result of something else – a trait, as part of a bio-psycho-spiritual being. Likewise, I changed the angle "susceptible followers" to "toxic followers", for similar reasons. I do not want to apportion blame, but rather to stress ownership and responsibility for the action associated with being a toxic follower, which contributes to toxicity in the workplace. I prefer to speak about "toxic" environments than "conductive" environments, as some of the external elements are more than just conducive; they directly contribute to toxicity in the workplace. For example, in my college, the state of finances in the college, which used to

be reported on in a transparent monthly report, is now unknown to managers, due to the reporting structures that are part of the new management system of the college.



**Figure 3.2:** The toxic triangle model that Padilla et al. (2007) postulated

**3.6 Systems theory**

My attraction to systems theory is evident from the theoretical choices I have made thus far. As I opt for Kirsten et al.’s (2009) holistic ecosystemic view of wellness and their model of well-being model, and the dialogic organisational development theory espoused by Bushe and Marshak (2009; 2014), I make explicit my commitment to work within a systems framework. General systems thinking (GST) can be traced back to the philosopher Alfred Whitehead (1979) and the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (2015). For the sake of consistency I am keeping a

close watch on my discussion in chapter 2, where I ground myself as an action researcher who is in the process of 'becoming' in my theoretical framework of systems thinking, as I draw from Alfred Whitehead's process philosophy, which is equated with his contribution to systems theory by way of his 'philosophy of organism' (Poisson, 2011; Polanowski & Sherburne, 2012). My understanding of the essence of systems thinking is that it is an inter- and transdisciplinary approach, spanning several fields of enquiry, and that it acknowledges that each element has a bearing on the whole, and that each element is related to a minimum of one other element in the whole. As such, the whole cannot be understood from any one of its parts, but rather from the perspective of the whole itself, and in the patterned interconnectedness of the parts in their relation to one another and to the whole. With this as background, I now focus on two of the cousins in the 'family' of systems theory, namely chaos theory and complexity theory.

Chaos theory has its origins in the argument of the French mathematician Henri Poincaré in the 1800s that there are some behaviours of astral bodies in the solar system that just cannot be explained using the linear physics theories of Isaac Newton (Vinuelas & Githens, 2010). While it is true that Poincaré was aware of the seemingly random behaviour of some of these bodies, I do not believe that he can be credited with chaos theory, a position akin to that of Ghys (2015). Chaos theory as we know it today is attributed to the American mathematician and meteorologist Edward Norton Lorenz (2001), who worked with computer models for predicting weather patterns, and observed the effect of rounding off mathematical calculations to three or six decimal places, which produced a range of unpredictable results, observable as patterns of weather behaviour (Oestreicher, 2007). Balci (2012:120) defines chaos as "non linear and disordered dynamic systems with unpredictable deterministic behaviors". Hence, Lorenz's 'butterfly effect' is used extensively, where he asked in a paper delivered on 29 December 1972 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "Does the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?" The point Lorenz was making was that the minutest behaviour can have enormous consequences elsewhere. In chaos theory, small changes in initial conditions can lead to unanticipated outcomes or consequences, which make accurate prediction impossible. I like to explain chaos theory in the following way. If a number of marbles were placed on a tea tray, for example, and the tray was shaken up and down, the marbles would move and start to lift and fall. What would be observed would be 'random' chaos, as some marbles would bounce out of the tray, others would collide in mid-air, others would collide on falling, and yet others would not touch each other at all. It would seem that there was no order at all – just randomness. However, there are natural laws of order operating, such as velocity, gravity, and momentum. Hence, it is not random behaviour on the part of the marbles, but chaos. If one of the marbles were to be marked and placed back in the tray before the tray was shaken, the movement of that marble could be traced. If it were to be placed in the tray for a

second time with all the other marbles, also starting from their original place on the tray, and assuming that the tray was shaken with the same velocity, and at the same angle, the marked marble would move in a similar but not exact repeatable pattern. If the experiment were repeated with all the other marbles starting from their original place on the tray, but the marked marble were moved each time to a different place on the tray (the initial starting point), and the movement of the marble were traced each time, the behaviour pattern of the marble would change each time as a result of the change in the marble's initial starting point. On some instances the marble would collide mid-air with the other marbles, on others it would not, and yet on other instances it would jump off the tray, etc. The pattern of trajectory of the marble would be unpredictable.

For this very reason, I find chaos theory useful in organisational development, and in its influence in change theory. Epistemologically and ontologically, chaos theory makes sense to me, as I reject a 'one size fits all' approach, as it assumes that organisations, and hence their constituents – people – are machines working in a closed mechanical system, which can be manipulated, tested, and predicted in terms of their function and behaviour. Chaos theory stresses that in a deterministic non-linear system, predictability is unpredictable. People in organisations are essentially unpredictable. There are too many variables, or interconnections, within an ecosystem that influence behaviour. For this reason, I am sceptical of the change management approach in organisational development. People cannot be managed; however, by contrast, processes, systems, and policies can, and must, be managed, and this approach reduces conflict in the workplace, as it depersonalises management issues.

Unfortunately, what managers want, particularly in bureaucratic organisations, such as government institutions, like the college, is stability. They want all the marbles in the marble metaphor used above to behave in exactly the same way, and, if possible, not to move at all. Managers then feel that they have control, and that outcomes are predictable. The reason for this is succinctly stated by Wheatley (2007:60):

This real world stands in absolute contrast to the world invented by Western thought during the past 400 or so years. We believe that people, organizations and the world are machines, and we organize massive systems to run like clockwork in a steady-state world [...] And most importantly, as we cling ever more desperately to these false beliefs, we destroy our ability to respond to the major challenges of these times.

Managers that are locked into this way of thinking believe that it is then easy to manage in a linear cause-and-effect Newtonian mechanistic environment. Unfortunately, the world outside is in flux, and is changing, politically, socially, economically, and environmentally, so that nothing is constant. Employees and students are part of this world of change. Hence, when the

management paradigm and the management style contradict the world of employees and students, there is bound to be conflict and power struggles. In these power struggles, paradigm clashes and top-down management styles are questioned, and this is where toxicity finds a breeding ground. What is lost by trying to gain control and stability is the energy needed for growth and development of individuals and the organisation. Hence, what is needed is for the college to live at the edge of chaos, as espoused in chaos theory (Balci, 2012; Heylighen, 2009). The edge of chaos is meant to signify the tipping point, the edge where there are deterministic chaotic patterns and randomness, where there are no patterns at all, and disorder. Where randomness and chaos meet – on the edge of chaos – is where energy exists for sustained dynamic growth and development. In my opinion, no one has captured this notion better than Waldrop (1992:12), when he states that “the edge of chaos is the constantly shifting battle zone between stagnation and anarchy, the one place where a complex system can be spontaneous, adaptive, and alive”.

In chaotic systems, even within organisations, groups of elements or people are able to come together on their own as self-organising units. What I mean by self-organisation is the spontaneous ability of the components within a system to interact in such a way (that is not arbitrary) to external factors while there is no individual control agent giving leadership. In order to explain some of the dynamics in Chaos theory a flock of birds has been referred to (Resnick, 1997:3). Take, for example, a flock of birds flying past that is disturbed by an external object being thrown at it. The individual birds in the flock change speed and direction, and manoeuvre themselves in an instant, to regroup into their flying formation, without any command or direction being given by any leader. It is an instinct with the birds, an internal unconscious ability to read the interrelatedness of all the parts to each other and to the whole. This is an important concept in organisational development, as sometimes within a chaotic situation, a leader blaring out commands may be more disruptive than simply allowing employees to do what they know best, and to ‘regroup’ and restore some sort of ‘formation’ on their own that contributes to growth and development of individuals, and to the organisation as a whole.

Flowing from these concepts (namely the complex interconnectedness of all components within a non-linear system, and the principle of self-organisation) is the idea of emergence. By emergence, I am referring to the emergent change that takes place at the edge of chaos, away from stability, where an attractor has enough energy to make behaviour emerge that is different to the preceding behaviour. In other words, the chaos has reached its tipping point, where there is self-organising and adaptive behaviour that emerges as a new pattern of behaviour. Hence, emergent change is unpredictable, spontaneous, and often unintentional (Liebhart & Lorenzo, 2010), and it may be initiated at any level within the organisation by the smallest of changes

(the so-called 'butterfly effect'). The implication of this concept is that change does not have to be a top-down employer-led process, but that any employee (or, in this research, my action learning set) may be the agent of change.

The final element of chaos theory that I will draw on is the concept of attractors (Lorenz, 2001). In chaos theory, there are two types of attractors, namely point attractors and strange attractors (Bussolari & Goodell, 2009). Point attractors are identified by repeated, habitual behaviour patterns, and are observed, for example, in organisations that are stuck, or trapped, in traditions, while in strange attractors, new, novel, unpredictable behaviour patterns emerge as growth points. Attractors may display negative or positive attributes. In dysfunctional organisations, where toxic behaviour is evident, bullying, for example, may be such an attractor that the behaviour shown towards the victim is relentless.

Complexity theory has also been referred to in the literature as "complexity science", or simply as "complexity", and it is relevant to action research (Zuber-Skerritt, Fletcher & Kearney, 2015:17). It is also true that in the literature, the terms "chaos" and "complexity" are often used interchangeably (Bussolari & Goodell, 2009:100), but while these concepts are close cousins within the systems family, and they often overlap in their premises, there are differences. Zuber-Skerritt et al. (2015) use the Cynefin model<sup>7</sup> to describe complexity theory. While this approach is useful, in my view it deals more with the application of complexity than with elucidating what complexity theory is. It is difficult to find a clear, well-defined definition of complexity theory, as is acknowledged by Heylighen (2009). What I want to draw on from complexity theory are three things, namely the complex interconnectedness of all components within a non-linear system, the principle of self-organisation, and the phenomenon of emergence. In complex organisations, the interlinkages between individuals, departments, reporting structures, and internal and external stakeholders are so complex that there is no linear cause-and-effect model that can be used to understand the dynamics of the organisation. Complexity theory is important for this study, as it provides a lens through which to see how relationships are developed, threatened, and destroyed in toxic organisations. It is never just one relationship between employee A and

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<sup>7</sup> Snowden's Cynefin (2007) sense-making model indicates that happenings, situations, and habitats can be reduced to five domains, where two of the domains are characterised by stability, two by instability, and one by disorder. The ordered domains are simple or complicated. In these domains it is not too difficult to see links and patterns, and it is easy to apply cognitive thinking skills to problems. The two unstable domains are complex and chaotic. In complex situations, there are too many connections, which could provide an array of correct answers to the problem, but there is no certainty as to which is the best answer. In chaotic situations, there is no prediction as to what the outcome may be of choosing a particular way of resolving problems, and the speed of change is so quick that immediate action is favoured, despite not knowing what results it may trigger. When facing problems, the data is examined, to determine which of the four domains is appropriate to be used. This is done from the final domain, namely the habitat of disorder.

employee B, or between employer C and employee D, that constitutes a toxic organisation. It is the myriad of relationships that come into play. Hence, the model of the toxic triangle, which I have alluded to previously in the chapter, is a suitable model. Therefore, there is no 'one size fits all' solution to problems, nor is it guaranteed that what worked once will work again.

### **3.7 Summary remarks**

In this theoretical chapter, which, on reflection, I have found extremely rewarding as an action researcher, I have drawn together theories that support my ontological values of inclusiveness, building healthy relationships, and critically creating space for all employees to deal with the toxicity of the college, created by the connectedness of constituent parts of the toxic triangle – toxic leaders, toxic followers, and toxic environments. In order to understand how toxicity creeps into organisations, and how organisations function, I have been influenced by chaos theory and complexity theory, and I will use these theories as points of reference in this study. I have used the framework of a holistic ecosystemic view of the health, well-being, and wellness of the human being, in order to understand the effect that organisational toxicity has on me, as well as on my colleagues, in the college where I work. Furthermore, I have committed myself to working within a dialogic OD framework, in order to change the way the college does organisational development. I have embraced a values-driven organisation approach, so as to enhance the values of the college, and to reduce the organisational toxicity in the college, thereby creating a healthy workplace for all employees. My academic training in systematic theology has helped to ensure that I work within a framework that is ontologically acceptable, and that is at the same time epistemologically justifiable and relevant to me as an inside researcher and HR manager in the college. I have a strong bias towards systems thinking. This bias is seen in the theoretical framework that I have employed in this study, namely the wellness model, the dialogical OD approach, and values-driven organisation theory, which are all underpinned by the chaos and the complexity systems theories of understanding human behaviour and organisational development. In the following chapter, I explain the research methodology that I have employed in this action research project.

## CHAPTER 4

# HOW AM I GOING TO GO ABOUT DOING WHAT I WANT TO DO? A QUESTION OF METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I find my mind wandering down different paths as to how best to set forth a research design and methodology chapter. There is a part of me that wants to follow what was traditionally held as a left-brain activity of sequential linear logic, while another part of me wants to invoke the traditional thinking pertaining to right-brain activity of creativity. I am grateful that the left-brain versus right-brain dominance debate has been laid to rest as erroneous, and that I can resolve this inner conflict by means of remaining loyal to my theoretical choices of the previous chapter.<sup>8</sup> Chaos theory and complexity theory are non-linear in essence, and while planning is an inevitable linear activity stemming from the stance of responsibility, predictability remains elusive. Hence, describing the research design of a study is not a once-off activity, or a blueprint that will ensure a predetermined result, but a process to be revisited continuously as the study progresses. This position is well articulated by Lewis and McNaughton Nicholls (2014:47), when she states that “[g]ood planning is essential [...] and design in qualitative research is not a discrete stage at the outset of the study but a continuing process of review and adjustment throughout”.

I acknowledge the differences between design, methodology, and methods (McGregor & Murnane, 2010). For my study, I articulate the concept of design as that activity that gives the cognitive shape and form that a study will take. It is much like designing a building, a house, a school, a factory, or a theatre, for example. The research design is the type of enquiry that will be undertaken within a quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods approach, and it may be addressed as a strategy of enquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In this study, a qualitative action research is the design employed to develop my living theory. A design is what is conceived at the beginning of a research project, and what is envisaged will stand at the end of the project, after the strategy has been completed. Methodology, by contrast, answers the question “how?” in what is designed and undertaken during the research process. The question that arises is

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<sup>8</sup> Roger Sperry, an American biopsychologist who won a Nobel Prize in 1981, was the first to postulate the idea, based on his research in the late 1960s, that the two hemispheres of the brain had distinct thinking patterns. The right hemisphere of the brain was linked to visual awareness, and seeing the big picture, and was posited to be creative and intuitive. The left hemisphere, on the other hand, was posited to be verbal and language-orientated, analytical, sequential, and detail-focused. The right brain was seen as analogical, and the left brain as digital. Hence, personality types were linked to the dominance of one hemisphere over the other. This theory became popular and was believed to be true, until it was debunked as a myth by research undertaken by Jared Nielsen, Brandon Zielinski, Michael Ferguson, Janet Lainhart, and Jeff Anderson (2013) at the University of Utah.

“How will a living theory be linked to this study?” A living theory is an output, an explanation of my own learning and practice, as emanating from engaging in action research. Hence, this study’s research methodology is entrenched in action research. In the metaphor of the building used above, if it were a double-storey house that was being designed, then the methodology would be “How would it be constructed from the foundations up?” The methods in this case would be what would be needed in order to build it so that it meets the standards and criteria of the envisaged house. In other words, the methods relate to the choices of what materials will be used, and how they will be procured, stored, and utilised in the construction process. Methods therefore relate to the logistics surrounding the data – how the data will be generated, analysed, interpreted, and secured.

In making my learning and knowledge of practice explicit by way of a living theory, I have to dig deep into my own practice. A self-study action research becomes the fertile ground out of which a living theory can be constructed (Wood, 2009). This understanding must not be confused with self-study as a research methodology, which finds its roots in teacher reflective practices (Samaras & Freese, 2009). While both self-study and action research rely on critical friends, the use of cycles, and transparency in making explicit the research practice and sharing the results within a public domain, the difference, as I see it, between the two approaches lies in the beginning and the end of the process. Self-study takes as point of departure authoring one’s own questions (Samaras, 2011). These questions are observations and reflections by the researcher on their own practice. Action research is far more problem-orientated than self-study, as action research identifies a problem, and at the end seeks change, not merely an understanding of self and practice..

#### **4.2 The research question that glues everything together**

Throughout this enquiry I have ensured that my research question has held centre stage. The reason for this is that the rest of the research process may lose coherence unless there is a common element that holds everything together. The research question does exactly that and is stated in all chapters as: “How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current climate of toxicity which is experienced every day?”. My study is a self-study, an inquiry into how I can improve my practice and contribute to reducing the toxicity in the college, through promoting life-enhancing values and an improvement in wellness in the context of organisational development. Hence, chapter 2 dealt strongly with the “I” in my research, while chapter 3 broadened the theoretical basis for influence in organisational development. This chapter focuses on the methodology that I have chosen to answer my research question.

### **4.3 The rationale behind the study**

The research question also brings into play the rationale for the study, which in my case is grounded in my ontological values, as I have come out of a successful teacher training college in Bophuthatswana,<sup>9</sup> with a high quality of dedicated staff, where the values of trust, professionalism, commitment, respect, and human dignity were lived out. We were a proud workforce that produced excellent results, and those values I found entrenched in my own standards of judgement for myself, my fellow colleagues, and my students. The training college employed top-class staff, where one member of staff became a provincial minister of education, another became a provincial director of education, another became a national minister of education, and who is currently the National Minister of Science and Technology, and another became a registrar of a university. So, with the values that I experienced and taught in my career, how could I stand by silently, arms folded, and watch the values that I aspired to become eroded month by month, year by year, six years after the merger of the colleges into the TVET sector? As the values became eroded, and the toxicity in the college increased, as an HRD manager I supported conduct of research into what was happening in my college, by recommending granting of a bursary for a colleague, Helena Meyer, to undertake research into the wellness of the college. The result is that Meyer's findings confirmed and validated the levels of psychological violence suffered by employees (Meyer, 2011; Meyer & Kirsten, 2014). When the toxicity affected my health, it was a tipping point for me. I had to do something about my health, the health of my colleagues, and the health of the institution, otherwise what type of HRD manager would I be? On the basis of the aforementioned scenario, I not only wanted to understand what was going on, but I wanted to contribute to positive change. The driver for this inquiry therefore rests with this cognitive and emotional dissonance that I experienced, knowing that my ontological values, and those of the institution, were being violated and denied by the toxic triangle, as described in chapter 2, and yet I was part of this bureaucratic system, as a human resource manager.

### **4.4 My philosophical orientation**

Relying on Huff's (2009) approach, Creswell (2013) answers the question as to the importance of philosophy as an element in the research process, by indicating that philosophy indeed helps in the formulation of the problem statement and the research question. Further, it shapes how information is sought in order to answer the research question. In addition, our philosophical assumptions are "deeply rooted in our training and reinforced by the scholarly community in which we work" (Creswell, 2013:19). Finally, when the study is reviewed, the reader will also

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<sup>9</sup> Bophuthatswana was the first of the independent homelands established in apartheid South Africa. It was the only homeland established for Setswana-speaking people in South Africa under the apartheid government of the former National Party administration. The purported reason for the establishment of the homelands was to ensure separate development and entrench apartheid philosophy.

have their own philosophical assumptions.<sup>10</sup> There may be a misreading of the study if the researcher's philosophical assumptions and choices are not made explicit.

In light of the above, I make known throughout the study that my research as theory and practice rests on my epistemological and ontological paradigms. Epistemological paradigms relate to how I come to know what I know, while ontological paradigms relate to the way of being in the world. The knowledge of how I come to know is an important concept in research. Knowledge is gained at different levels and in different domains. Within the cognitive field, knowledge may be gained through a rational approach of understanding, resulting in formal knowledge, namely that which can be written down, verbally explained, and demonstrated. By contrast, Polanyi (1958, 1966) introduced the term "tacit knowledge" and explained its significance as an epistemology. Tacit knowledge, according to my understanding of Polanyi, is a personal knowledge that is inherent within an individual's cognitive domain that cannot be articulated. For example, words cannot describe all of what we know, but we know, and this knowing can be demonstrated in praxis. In a disciplinary hearing which I may be conducting, for example, I know what the argument is that is being put forward, and I know where it is leading, and how and when I will respond to it, and in what manner. This knowing is not entirely as a result of theoretical learning from case studies and applying legal processes, which is explicit knowledge. It is more than that; it is knowledge gained from experience of having "been there [and] done that", and yet it is even more than that. It is an intuitive personal knowledge that cannot be explained from a rational point of view, but it is so much of who I am and how I am that it comes naturally to the fore in order to influence behaviour. Tacit knowledge is not easily transferable. The question therefore remains: "How do I know both explicit, or formal, knowledge and tacit knowledge, especially if tacit knowledge is more difficult to transfer?" The above exposition already takes us into the philosophical debate concerning knowledge and truth.

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<sup>10</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer's use of Heidegger's interpretation of texts speaks of *Horizontverschmelzung*, the fusion of horizons between the writer and the reader of a text. Meaning 10 Hans-George Gadamer's use of Heidegger's interpretation of texts speaks of *Horizontverschamelzung*, the fusion of horizons between the writer and the reader of a text. Meaning as a result of interpretation takes place at two levels: when the intention of the writer is known, and when there is suspension of one's own position in order to listen to and accommodate the other. For my discussion, the philosophical assumptions of both author and reader rest on their respective horizons. Unless the intention of the author (the philosophical assumptions) is made explicit, the text, or the study, may not be understood, and the researcher's outputs may thus be in jeopardy.

From the above, it is easy to deduce that I reject the idea that within a sociological framework of research, knowledge lies solely in the hands or minds of experts, who, in my opinion, are trapped in their own laager mentality, of a purely scientific approach that reduces people to things or objects that are knowable only through observation and testing. How can it, if tacit knowledge eludes language and transferability, and is a personal construct, and therefore unique? For this reason, I hold to the view that knowledge is a social construct that is constructed in the minds of individuals as they interact, enter into dialogue, and communicate and rub shoulders with each other as social human agents. I come to know only in relation to others. What I hold to be true, if it is not juxtaposed with an alternative, not refined or tested, may never be known to be true. As the concept of time is constructed in a linear way, so that is there is a past, a present, and a future, I must be prepared for my view to be juxtaposed with any alternative at any time in the future that may negate my view. Hence, truth, be it partial, developing, and never final, is space-time-bound, and is contextual in nature. In one context it may be true, but in another it may be falsified. Thus, any knowledge emerging within the social field is what I call contextualised knowledge. It has its own vocabulary, limitations, durability, and usefulness, and in this way it opens up knowledge to growth, development, change, and adaptation. From a chaos theory and complexity theory perspective, truth is a developing, emergent concept, and not a fixed, set-in-stone fact, as there are just too many variables (Radford, 2008). While I understand truth as a dialectical process that operates at a number of levels simultaneously, depending on the number of participatory minds that I have interactions with, it cannot be reduced, in an evolutionary or Hegelian sense. It does not narrow down, but opens up to wider, more participatory agendas, and a continual expansion of knowledge that is constantly changing takes place. The essence of knowledge does not rest in drilling down to the micro elements, which is a reductionist approach, but in the macro relationship of elements, which is continually expanding in a participatory framework of social interaction.

#### **4.5 My research approach**

From my philosophical stance, my epistemological and ontological understanding of myself in relation to my world, including my workplace, as an HRD manager emerges. In line with this stance, I have chosen a qualitative research methodology for this self-inquiry into my own practice. Qualitative research attempts to answer the questions of how and why (Smith & Chudleigh, 2015). However, the how and why for me in this research are related to emotions and values of employees at a TVET college. I like the way Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest and Namey (2005:1) include the values and context elements in their discussion on qualitative research, when they state that “[q]ualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of

particular populations". This emphasis gels coherently with my study of the toxic leaders, toxic followers and toxic environment of a TVET college.

Thomas Kuhn (2012) was correct in pointing out that science is not a stacking of knowledge on an even continuum, but that the progress of science is punctuated by scientific revolutions, where the accepted knowledge is not able to progress, as it no longer is able to answer new questions that are raised. These revolutions require paradigm shifts. For a paradigm to exist in a scientific way, it must meet certain criteria to attain credibility. Hence, it must meet the consensus of a knowledge-based or scientific community, it must serve the needs of that community at that particular point in time, and it must not be a development, or a tweaking, of the old paradigm, but a new way of addressing a new problem from a new standpoint, requiring a new epistemology, framework, process and understanding. In this way, paradigm shifts are revolutionary. History provides us with examples of where paradigm shifts have occurred, such as the move from seeing the cosmos from a Ptolemaic to a Copernican to a Newtonian perspective. It is important, for the sake of coherence, to see that paradigms are not theories, but rather that theories emerge from and are based on and are subservient to paradigms.

One way of perceiving a paradigm is to see it as a major umbrella concept that covers all other related concepts, such as theories, ontologies, and epistemologies. I, personally, prefer to refer to a paradigm as an organising principle. An organising principle suggests that there are rules and procedures to be followed in answering what questions should be asked within what particular field of knowledge. Having this conception of a paradigm, it is easy to see how the components of research, such as research methods, participant selection, and design, fit together in a systematic and organised way. Further, I understand that more than one paradigm may be used, as there may be more than one way of perceiving and being in the world. I argue that when more than one non-conflicting paradigm is used, we can refer to this as stacking, or layering, paradigms. This adds to the texture of the understanding. In my interaction with staff, it is inability to see another person's perspective, that is, where they are coming from, and why they are holding to their position of choice, which often is the cause, not just of misunderstandings, but of conflict. However, having said that, I also maintain that paradigms cannot and must not be in conflict with each other. In other words, I cannot be a socialist and a capitalist at the same time, nor can I employ a positivist paradigm and a post-positivist paradigm at the same time. Thus, from chapter 1 and running throughout my study, I have embedded myself within a post-positivist critical participatory paradigm. In practice, what this means is that I am critically engaged as a practitioner-researcher in a self-study focused on how I bring about change to my own practice. However, I realise that I cannot do this in isolation, as all things are interrelated at one level or another, and thus I use a participatory approach, as my research is

conducted within an organisation, with all its complexities and chaos, which is described in the literature as toxic. This leads me to answering the question of which methodology is appropriate based on my paradigmatic choices.

#### **4.6 My research strategy: methodology**

I now turn to unpacking, under the qualitative approach, my research strategy. Due to the fact that (1) I identified a social problem in the workplace, namely toxicity, (2) I wanted to improve my own practice as an HRD manager engaged in organisational development, in order to reduce toxicity, (3) I wanted to influence others to improve their practice, and (4) I wanted to give an account of my own learning and that of my colleagues, this places me squarely in the terrain of action research and action learning. I hold firmly to the belief that the methodology must be appropriate to address the research question, and this will become evident in this study. However, within the historical development of this methodology, the action research family has expanded and developed, so that there are different strains and approaches within action research. The methodological elements of action research must be separated from the methods in action research. Action research can be seen as a methodology – a strategy for undertaking research through action cycles. In this section, I am dealing with action research as a strategy, a methodology to address my research question. I will now tease out the options I had, and then indicate why I chose action research as a particular strategy that will allow me to develop a living theory of organisational development.

There is a no shortage of literature tracing the history of action research, and the majority of authors indicate that such research has its roots in the work of Kurt Lewin in the United States, while he was director of the Center for Group Dynamics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) (Bargal, 2006; Beaulieu, 2013; Maksimovic, 2010; Masters, 1995; Titchen, 2015). Others trace it back further, to John Collier (McNiff, 2013a:56). As a social psychologist, Lewin is just as well known for his force field analysis and group dynamics. However, as one of the “fathers of action research (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011:36), he referred to his research as “a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action” (Lewin, 1946:35). Hence, from the very beginning, action research was geared for change, as it involved practitioners taking action. Bargal (2006:369) identifies eight principles in Lewin’s writing that have influenced action research: a systematic study of a social problem; a spiral process of data collection; feedback of the results of the intervention to all parties involved in the research; continuous cooperation between researchers and practitioners; a reliance on the principles of group dynamics, and an anchoring in its change phases; a taking into account of issues of values, objectives, and power needs of the parties involved; creation of knowledge, formulation of principles of intervention,

and development of instruments for selection, development, and training; and an emphasis on the recruitment, training, and support of the change agents.

Action research has been linked to the influence of John Dewey in terms of participatory democracy, something that Lewin himself was interested in, and Dewey's concept of knowledge generation being experiential and participatory in nature (Charles & Ward, 2007). I have spent time discussing Lewin's theories, as he also is influential in organisational development, and in bringing about change in an organisation, which makes action research of interest to me in my context. However, Lewin's dictum of "no action without research; no research without action" does not mean that he had untied himself from the positivist paradigm, as he still meant that empirical research precedes action, and that empirical research rests on assumption of an existing real world that can be quantified (Bushe & Marshak, 2009).

The action research family grew with the influence of "Third World" development through South American liberation theologians, educationalists and activists (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005:273), resulting in what is known as participatory action research (PAR). Marxist philosophy was prevalent in these fields of study, and thus participatory action research (PAR) took on political dimensions, such as emancipation of the poor and the marginalised, critiquing the role of power, and liberation of the human mind that was held captive through education systems. I find myself drawn to PAR, because as a theologian, my master's dissertation focused on the relationships between Black theology in South Africa and liberation theology in South America. South Africa and South American countries like Brazil, Argentina and Chile were fighting a race battle and a class battle, respectively, and their struggles were underpinned by the participation of "the have-nots" in finding emancipation, and thereby becoming fully human through democratic values. These democratic values, such as equality, freedom, and tolerance, are entrenched in my own value system as an HR manager. PAR draws heavily on the writings of Paulo Freire, which explored participatory adult learning and the reflective nature of evaluating actions (Baum, MacDougall & Smith, 2006). Hence Freire's statement that "reflection without action is sheer verbalism or armchair revolution and action without reflection is pure activism, or action for action's sake" (1972:41). Freire stresses the importance of the participatory reflective nature of action research. In praxis, action and reflection cannot be separated. In the dialectic relationship between theory and practice, between reflection and action, emerges knowledge, emancipation and empowerment derived from a participatory base.

Toxicity as understood within the framework of the toxic triangle model will always have elements of power and organisational politics (Cacciattolo, 2015), as it deals with dysfunctional organisations and dysfunctional toxic leaders who display bullying or abusive behaviour in the

workplace. However, it is not only organisational politics, with its hidden agendas, manipulation, and power plays, that influences organisational behaviour, but the fact that in the South African context, the alliance partners of the African National Congress (ANC) as the ruling party include the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and hence the unions bring into the organisation not just organisational politics, but the politics of the ruling party as well. Due to this political environment, and the emancipation of workers, PAR could have been an option for this study.

Since the First World Congress on Action Research and Process Management, held in 1990 in Australia, Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt has been championing the cause of action learning and action research (ALAR) (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). Dick (2009) refers to Zuber-Skerritt as the midwife of ALAR, which he refers to as the marriage of action learning and action research. Action learning is traced back to Reginald Revans (Leonard & Marquardt, 2010). Like Lewin, Revans was influenced by Dewey, and the participatory approach of action learning sets to act and to reflect upon action in order to learn from concrete engagement in solving problems. Zuber-Skerritt (2001) contributes to my understanding of ALAR, when she demonstrates the theoretical framework that she sees as overlapping influences on ALAR. The four theories that overlap are personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955), systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 2015), grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Fuchs 2015). ALAR rests on a non-positivist approach to research, resulting in a wider, holistic, phenomenological stance to what constitutes learning, rather than a narrow positivist position as to what is scientific knowledge and what is its epistemology.

Action learning appeals to me for a number of reasons. At a personal level, having worked in teacher education for 20 years, and having been in training and development of adults as an HRD manager for over 12 years, I have a commitment to learning. In fact, I hold to the position, which also becomes my point of departure, that when dealing with cognition and learning, the human brain does one thing: it asks questions and seeks answers, as one activity. Hence, the learning element of action learning, when done in collaboration with others, within an organisational context, finds resonance with what I hoped to achieve in answering my research question, namely “How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current climate of toxicity which is experienced every day?”.

*Participatory action learning and action research (PALAR)* arose out of a joint ALAR and PAR conference in 1997, six years after ALAR found resonance among researchers and practitioners. PALAR addressed the need for a research methodology that would address the

needs of community development and engagement, focusing on social justice, positive transformation, and sustainability (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015:5). While ALAR had been used and had been effective in organisational development (OD), and PAR had dominated in developing countries, originally to address social justice and equality issues, PALAR is being used to bring about positive social change, a more just and better world order, action leadership, and lifelong learning (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). The emphasis that PALAR “focuses not only on improving situations, but also on the learning that emanates from participants’ critical and collaborative reflection” (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013:7) has made PALAR an attractive methodology for my own learning, as I locate my “critical friends” (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2010; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006:106) within this genre of action research. The distinguishing traits of PALAR as a genre of action research are relationships, reflection, and recognition (Kearney, Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013), which are noticeable in the process of doing action research, and may be used as standards of judgement, or validating principles, of the process itself.

I am further drawn to PALAR not only for its participatory and collaborative emphasis and strong learning component through critical reflection, but because of it being steeped in values, which Zuber-Skerritt identified within the 7 C’s of PALAR (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt *et al.*, 2015:108). The 7 C’s are communication, collaboration, commitment, coaching, critical and self-critical attitude, competence, and character building. For example, it is within the principle of character building that the values of trust, respect, and collaboration are identified. When comparing PALAR’s concern with values, particularly with the college’s stated values in its mission and vision statement (Annexure P), which I do not see being lived out in practice, I could easily have come to the conclusion that using PALAR would be an appropriate action research approach to address toxicity in the workplace.

Living educational theory, more often referred to simply as living theory, has been well articulated and propagated through the writing of Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff, who have promoted it as a valid insider approach compared to the other action research genres, such as some of those that I discussed above. Whitehead’s conception of a living theory is that it is an individual’s creation, an explanation of “their educational influences in their own learning and in the learning of others” arising from the question “How do I improve what I am doing?”, where the “I” exists as a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989).

Living theory starts with the contradiction between practice and the standards of judgement, where the values of the individual are at odds with each other. This contradiction I experienced as an HR manager in the college. When I realised that part of my stress was caused by

knowing what correct HR practice was, but having to do the opposite, as senior management would not listen to my advice. For example, in 2009 I advised them not to promote all managers to the same level irrespective of qualifications or experience and without following proper procurement practices. Now, in 2016, after they failed to heed my advice, we sit with labour cases at the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC), awaiting arbitration. This is a blunder that has caused the college financial problems, motivational problems among staff, and dysfunctionality in some divisions, some seven years after implementation of an incorrect HR practice. Reflecting on this event, I could immediately identify with what Whitehead was talking about when he related, in a video that I saw of his teaching in 1971/2, that he became aware that what he was doing was not what he thought he was doing. He experienced himself as a living contradiction. Thus, like other action research genres, living theory starts with the need for change linked to a problem. However, the change, or the improvement, is not someone else's problem, which it may be, but it starts with improving one's own practice.

Living theory is a self-study, but not in every sense of the word, for one reason. Self-study is about learning, learning from and about one's own practice, but not necessarily about a commitment to bringing about change, or improvement of practice, outside of oneself (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2010). The lack of seeking to address problems other than one's own raises questions of rigour in validation (Feldman, 2003). The emphasis is on the learning aspect, without necessarily taking a critical stance to change or improve the status quo in the social domain. By contrast, validation of a living theory approach means that change, or improvement of practice, must be evident. I must be able to show evidence of educational influence that improves my practice, and influence that I have on others, so that they bring about an improvement in their practice, so that together we bring about social or institutional change in practice. This process of change takes place in a participatory way, through the following iterative spirals: (1) identification and analysis of a problem, or concern, (2) a planned change process to address the problem, or concern, (3) implementation and monitoring of the planned action, and (4) evaluation of and reflection on the entire process, so as to improve practice and resolve the problem. Due to the complexity of problems, it is not easy to resolve issues through one cycle, and hence the process is repeated continuously, as there is never a time when issues are perfectly resolved. It may also be that within the main cycle, new complex issues become evident and are treated as projects, in their own right.

The cyclical approach in my action research design for this study is shown below (Fig.4.1) and clearly show what plans, processes, and reflections were carried out over the duration of this study by the action learning set which I was part of as a cohort of managers.

**Cycle 1: Disrupting the system:** The purpose of this cycle is to critically disrupt the system of toxicity that I had identified and experienced, by challenging the life-enhancing values that were being violated. In this cycle I acted as an HRD manager doing diagnostic organisational development. I assumed that I had diagnosed the problem of toxicity and had found a solution to the problem, which needed to be implemented, controlled, and monitored. In this cycle I intended to impose my values, which I believed the organisation lacked, and I expected employees to embrace my efforts to bring about change. The diagnostic approach was driven by a positivist paradigm. At the morning meeting at the corporate centre, I gave a PowerPoint presentation to all the corporate centre employees, to show how organisational values are needed to counter the toxicity, as the college had a values statement, but it was not adhering to the identified values.

**Cycle 2: Establishing, maintaining, and co-generating data with the action learning set:** Due to the failure of cycle 1 to bring about change and improve wellness, and after reflecting on why it went wrong, I chose to work within a participatory paradigm, by forming an action learning set. I changed my organisational development approach from a diagnostic to a dialogic organisational development approach. In cycle 2, I validated my experiences with others, by getting the participants to draw two collages, one portraying emotionally traumatic toxic events over the period from 2009 to 2014, and the other depicting the hope that participants had for a changed college. Through the participatory inclusive approach, I did not find myself being subjective in my observations and hunches that the college was toxic. Finally, I was able to establish and maintain an action learning set that would actively participate in data generation and contribute to the change process. This second cycle would be based on reflecting on personal experiences of working with toxic managers, toxic followers, and a toxic environment, and juxtaposing these experiences and events with my literature study, through, among other things, videos, talks, and discussions on YouTube, and engaging in discussions with critical friends. This cycle led to the establishment and maintenance of an action learning set for collaboration in resolving the problem, and for generation, analysis and interpretation of data.

**Cycle 3: Identifying values and implementing strategies:** In the third and final cycle, the participants of the action learning set (identified managers) engaged in planning interventions to engage in promoting life-enhancing values that would impact upon the toxicity experienced in the workplace and contribute to employee wellness. I deal more comprehensively with the content, processes, and learning from this cycle, grounding them in my theoretical framework, in chapter 5. The purpose in this third cycle is to draw from the analysis of the data generated in cycle 2, with the aim of collaboratively strategising with the action learning set on OD interventions. This includes nurturing life-enhancing values, in order to reduce the toxicity and

improve the wellness of both the employees and the organisation. In this cycle, what the action learning set had learnt from the data analysis is implemented and carried through in the organisation. This approach in strategy is to ensure that there is an attempt at change, as I am working within a critical paradigm framework. Not only that, but through my reflections and those of the action learning set, I am consistent with my action research methodology to develop a living theory as an output of my study. I do this by answering my research question: “How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current toxicity which is experienced every day?” The cyclical nature will not end, but rather opens up to further cycles, as OD is an ongoing activity. This opening up to the future with envisaged cycles yet to come speaks to the sustainability of the project, a position already taken up by the action learning set, as they want to continue after my study has been written up. Activities in this cycle include compiling SWOT analysis profiles of individuals and of the corporate centre, organising advocacy campaigns for identified values, devising strategies to improve communication, and holding critical caring conversation café meetings, using Open Space Technology (Owen, 2008).

This first cycle was messy, because it was initiated by me as researcher-practitioner, but it was replaced in the second cycle to become a more participatory practitioner enterprise after the establishment of the action learning set. The cyclical process follows basically the diagram in chapter 1.

Practitioner self-enquiry can be collaborative through the participation of critical friends, validation groups, and participants in an action learning set. In developing a living theory, I also need evidence to show that my practice is aligned with my values. Action research is embedded in a values-driven approach (McNiff, 2013b). Hence, my values become my standards of judgement for validation purposes, as I do not only explain my journey of improved practice and educational influence; I must have evidence in answering the question “How do I improve my practice from a values base?” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011).

It was not an easy task to decide on a research methodology in the development of my proposal. I found myself fluctuating between the different genres of the action research family continually for over two months. It seemed that the more I read, the more confused I became. However, on reflection, two realisations influenced my choice of using action research to produce a living theory as an outcome of my study. The first was applying, to my process of choosing, an HR principle that I use in HR management, namely “fit for purpose” (Bredin & Soderlund, 2010), and the second was an existential component of “feeling at home” with the

methodology. The former is used when we are making sure that the right person, with the right qualifications, with the right experience, is matched to the right job. “Fit for purpose” has to do with function and outcomes, which, in turn, relate to performance and productivity. The concept of “feeling at home” was confirmed in reading Zuber-Skerritt (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001:4; Zuber-Skerritt, 2011:79), who argues that “it is the enquirer’s philosophical assumptions that mainly determine which methods s/he will choose, especially when the enquirer is conscious of his or her epistemological framework”.

I chose a self-study approach to action research, because I wished to draw on my long experience as an HR practitioner, and to improve my own practice, as well as influencing the practice of my colleagues, and through this, the climate in the organisation. As action research has included quantitative and qualitative methodology, I believe it is equally true that the enquirer’s experiences, context and lifelong learnings become embedded in the mindset of the enquirer, and these contribute to the choices that the enquirer makes, and can therefore contribute to the choice of what genre of action research to use. In this sense, it is a subjective choice, as it stems from my personal values, and not from a set of rules or objective truths. When choices are made that are congruent with who you are (ontological choices) and how you think (epistemological choices), I call it “feeling at home”. This choice of methodology resonates with who I am and how I see the world – my *Weltanschauung*. Thus my paradigms drive my thinking and being in the world, until at either an epistemological or an ontological level I have negative feedback that the paradigm is no longer working, in other words my way of explaining, knowing, and relating does not work for me anymore. Hence, Kuhn’s (2012) paradigm shift indicates that when an explanation (a particular theory) of what is observed can no longer be accommodated by that explanation (or theory), over time the explanation (or theory) is replaced by an alternative explanation (theory) that works better at explaining the phenomenon. When this happens, the new paradigm is embraced, and the old is rejected and replaced with the new. For this reason, I like to speak of paradigms as organising principles. Paradigms do more than merely offer explanations (theories); they influence and organise our way of understanding, explaining, being, and behaving. Hence, the choices we make, not only regarding what methods to use (whether quantitative or qualitative), but within a framework such as action research, are extended to what approaches or genre of action research we choose. Willis (2007:8) regards paradigms as “belief systems”, “world views”, “framework[s] that [guide] research and practice”. So, the question is which genre of action research is fit for purpose and that I feel at home with, which will guide my research and my practice?

When I used the questions of Whitehead and McNiff, stated in Chapter 1 section 1.1. above, as triggers to reflect on my toxic workplace, I found an action research approach that was fit for

purpose, and in which I felt at home, namely practitioner self-enquiry, to develop my living theory. My action research project as depicted in Figure 4.1 that follows consisted of three cycles. The cycles entail observation and defining the problem area that needs addressing, changing or replacing. Once identified a plan of action to address the problem is devised and acted upon. In the implementation and output phase there is deep observations of the effect of implementing the plan to assess the change. Finally there is a reflection of the cycle and a second cycle starts with observation and planning. My three cycles were directed to a first attempt by myself to bring about change in values within the organisation. This attempt failed. The second cycle focused on the identification, establishment, maintenance and building of relationships within the action learning set and co-generating data using visual methods. The final cycle focused on the findings of the action learning set in the second cycle and focused on the implementation of organisation development processes.

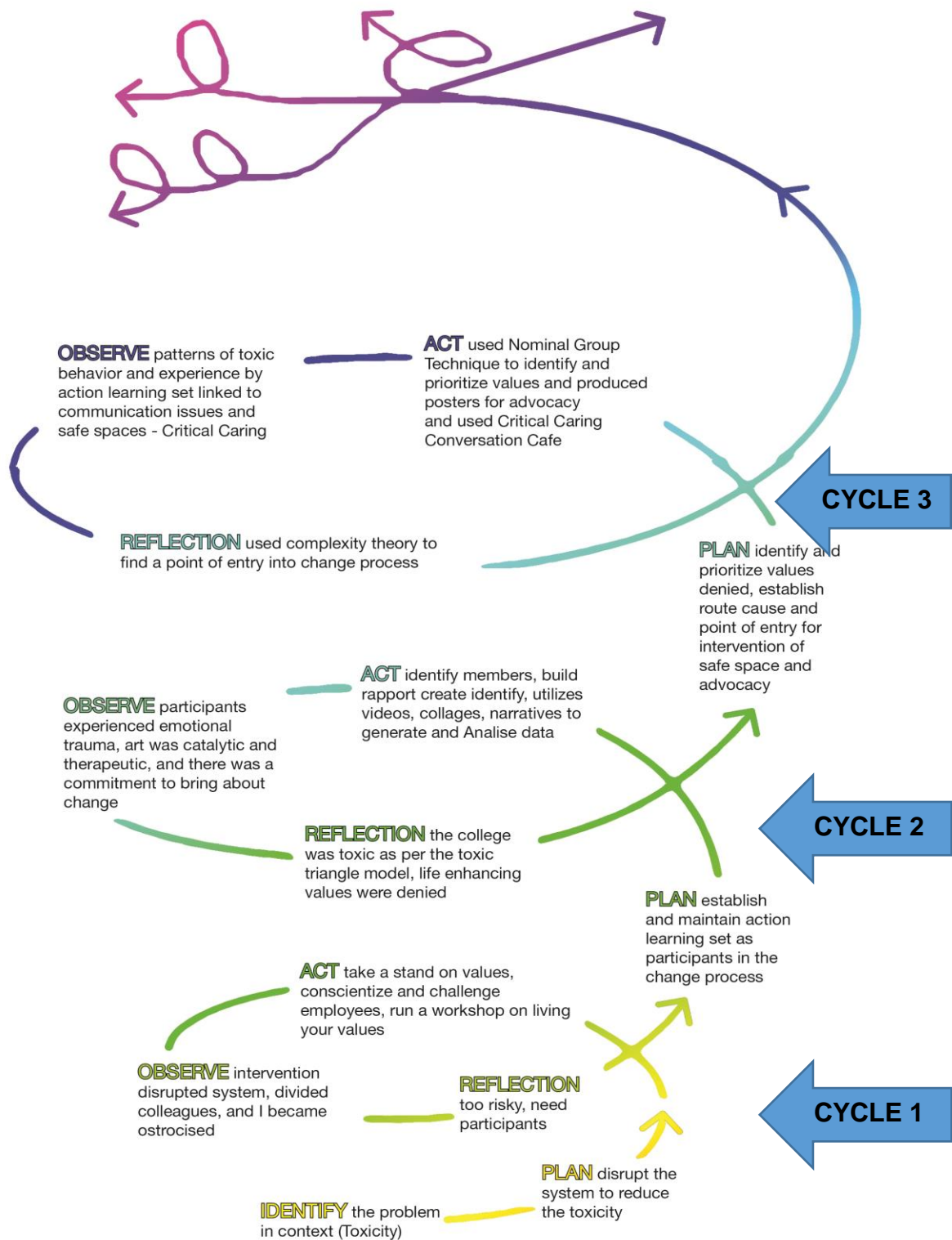


Figure 4.1: The three action research cycles undertaken in this study

#### **4.7 Research Setting**

This study is located at the corporate centre of the college, where all the managers report, attend meetings, and are briefed by the Department of Higher Education. It consists of a double-storey red-brick building housing the top management (the principal, two deputies, and a chief financial officer, or CFO) and the departments of finance, human resource management, marketing, student support, quality management, including health and safety, the deans for engineering and business management programmes, management information systems, and new business development. On the opposite side of the road, we purchased a building that houses the departments of information technology and supply chain management and transport. The corporate centre is the hub of the organisation, and it should be the flagship for the five campuses. It is staffed by 51 employees, 18 of which are managers, and 4 of which are top managers. There are 20 males and 31 females, 1 Indian, 37 blacks, and 13 whites. Unfortunately, it is the most “toxic” of all the sites where the college operates, and this is precisely why I have located my study here. By sites I am including the campuses and the corporate centre. If my research can start to positively influence the corporate centre, this should cascade down to the campuses, as the campuses take their cue from the organisational culture at the corporate centre, and from the managers there. A further reason for locating this study in the corporate centre is that I do not have the time to travel to all the sites, due to the remote locations of some of them. Finally, if I am to improve my practice as an HRD manager, and influence other managers to improve their practice, then it is most appropriate to do it in the context where all the managers report.

#### **4.8 Participants**

Identification and selection of appropriate participants is a core component of action research (Sargeant, 2012:1), as participants not only co-generate data, but play a pivotal role in analysis of the data, and in shaping what transpires in the research cycles. I think that the action learning set is the human catalyst wherein participation in reflection facilitates learning and change – it can be seen as the driver for construction of knowledge, and the catalyst for change. Through tacit knowledge acquired from working on a number of projects, both in the education and the church domains, I have learnt that in order to work as a group, identification of appropriate participants is important, but what is more important is the rapport that must exist between the participatory researcher and the participants. In this study, I identified that the managers were the key components at the corporate centre. The reason for this is that they have direct access to the top managers, Principal, and the deputies, they attend academic and management committee meetings, and they are in the best position to influence decisions that affect the running of the organisation. Secondly, they have, by way of their position as managers, some

influence on the people who report to them as subordinates. Thus, if change in the toxic organisation is an expected output of this research, then the managers needed to be part of it.

I also choose these managers as I believed that they would personally benefit for the following reasons: (1) it would be empowering for them as individuals in terms of their own learning, and (2) it would help them with the sustainability of this study, as it is hoped that reduction of toxicity would be an ongoing enterprise that would be carried out beyond the corporate centre by the members of the action learning set as change agents. I also decided to select the key managers, such as the financial manager, the QMS (quality management system) manager, and the Principal. My rationale for this was as follows. The QMS manager had a direct bearing on the organisational structure and policies, and would be useful in helping to understand the toxic environment. The financial manager had insight into the expenditure of the college, as well as the toxicity that existed among toxic followers, who bullied management into making poor financial decisions. The Principal was invited, as without top management being involved, I would have run the risk of being at the mercy of gatekeepers, and I may not have had the opportunity to have had permission to run the action learning set during office hours, to hold the Open Space Technology critical caring conversation café meetings, or to access minutes and reports. In addition, the toxicity experienced by subordinates was as a result of toxic leadership, so by being part of the action learning set, the Principal could understand the employees' vulnerability and suffering. However, more importantly, it was an ideal place for the Principal to reflect on the experience of being bullied by unions, students, and the provincial FET Directorate in the provincial Department of Education. Their participation would enhance my self-study, as I seek to improve my practice, influence others to improve theirs, and improve the organisation.

I also ensured that my choice was balanced in terms of employment equity, for two reasons. Firstly, my ontological (value of participation and inclusiveness) and epistemological (social construction of knowledge) roots anchored me to making the choice I made. I wanted to ensure a diversity of inputs in terms of gender, race, and age. Secondly, due to the internal political climate in which I work, no change of any sort would have been acceptable if not all races were included. A final criterion that I used was distance. Our northernmost campus is 310 km away from the southernmost campus, so I had to choose participants that would frequent the corporate centre most frequently, hence my choice of campus managers. Below is a table depicting the demographic profile of the action learning set, as well as the status of each member of the set on completion of the study.

**Table 4.1: The demographic profile of the action learning set**

No	Position	Gender	Race	Age	Status
1	Accountant	F	White	33	Resigned
2	Principal	F	Indian	51	Current
3	HRD Manager	M	White	60	Current
4	Campus Manager	M	African	50	Current
5	Campus Manager	M	Coloured	48	Current
6	Campus Manager	F	African	46	Current
7	Campus Manager	M	African	40	Dropped out
8	Campus Manager	F	White	51	Current
9	HRM	F	African	42	Resigned
10	TQM	M	White	45	Current
11	New Bus Manager	M	African	53	Current

Although I saw the majority of the managers on a daily basis, it did not mean that we had a strong relationship, which is necessary for the sort of interaction required in action learning set meetings. To ensure strong relationships requires hard work, and it is an ongoing process, which I found myself engaged in throughout the study. I started building rapport with the identified participants at least six months before the first action learning set meeting. This entailed meeting for a chat in the corridor, a quick chat in the office over coffee, or killing time before a meeting would start or after a meeting had ended. During this time, I was assessing how the participants were being affected by the work environment, whether they were affected psychologically, emotionally, physically, spiritually – or whether they did not know of toxic behaviour within the college. I was also able to determine during this period whether they had any ideas as to why things were happening the way they were, and what possibilities existed for improvement. Based on these six months of fact-finding, I was sure that the identified participants had something to offer, and that they would not merely be passive onlookers, but would rigorously contribute to discussions, due to their personality and level of maturity.

I thus chose purposeful sampling (Engel & Schutt, 2010; Palys, 2008) to recruit my participants. In qualitative research it is normal to enlist participants from a “deliberate”, “on-purpose” position, based on the need for “information-rich” perspectives from participants (Hennink *et al.*, 2011:85). Participants in purposeful sampling either have experience of the phenomenon in question, are representative of the context, or have insight into the phenomenon that is at the core of the research enquiry. This means that identification and recruitment of participants is not based on friendship or partisanship, and it is not done in a haphazard way. In fact, selection of participants for this study was done over a six-month period where I mulled over which of the managers would be most suitable as candidates, who would be less emotional about emotive issues, and who could be objective and professional in their reflections, insights, and advice.

In order to ensure that I met quality standards in identification and recruitment of participants, I found Hennink et al.'s (Hennink *et al.*, 2011:105) checklist useful. Their list contains six categories, namely "appropriate, coherent, transparent, interpretive, saturated and ethical", as criteria. I maintain that my study meets those criteria, in that the participants satisfied appropriate goals and are justified contributors. The population is justified as the research topic centres on reduction of the toxicity that exists, and a desire for wellness as part of organisational development. I have demonstrated transparency in my recruitment strategy, and I have further met the criteria of interpretive requirements, as the ALS participants were recruited for the purpose of gathering data through inductive participation. Saturation was achieved, for triangulation purposes, when the data co-generated by the ALS members, and the data generated by my observations, started to become repetitive, so that no new data was coming to the fore. Finally, the process of participation was ethical, with no hidden agendas, and signed consent was received for voluntary participation, with anonymity ensured.

#### **4.9 Methods to support the strategy**

In order to generate data that will support and substantiate my methodology and contribute positively to the rigour of this study, I have chosen visual methods, including two collages, videos of ALS members narrating their explanations of their drawing activities, video journals, and videos and photos of posters pertaining to student and staff strikes. Other methods used were ALS posters for an advocacy campaign, and SWOT analyses and documents generated in the workplace and directed at the college processes and activities.

I used visual methods and semi structured interviews as an approach where the ALS members drew two collages on separate pieces of unbleached calico, where the first collage depicted college events since 2009 that were emotionally traumatic for them, and the second collage was a positive short-term projection of how they would like to see the college change within a 3–4 month period.

I used these 3 semi-structured open ended questions below in the interviews while members of the action learning set were grooming horses

- What was different in the way you handle them (traumatic experiences), what has this taught you about yourself, your colleagues, the college, and your coping mechanisms?
- What have you learnt about organisations and organisational development by being part of the research project?

- In dialogic organisational development we want to change the language and the communication within an organisation. What words, symbols, and phrases have we used as an ALS group, and what must we continue with or add?

The semi structured interview questions and the prompt are found in Annexure N. The one collage addressed the toxicity as we had experienced it, and the other was directed at offering hope through change, or a reduction in toxicity. I chose to use visual methods for a number of reasons. One of the reasons was that I wanted to create a safe space and use an unobtrusive method for participants to express their negative experiences in the workplace. The content of the study deals with emotions and values, and I was sensitive, on ethical grounds, to deal gently with my own emotions and those of my colleagues in the ALS. Art has been used effectively within a qualitative research paradigm to deal with the type of emotions that this study addresses (Greenwood, 2012; Hass-Cohen & Carr, 2008; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik & Alberts, 2006:9). Visual methods such as drawing collages are truly participatory, offering a sense of creativity, ownership, and voice to participants who may be shy or may lack language proficiency, where imagery has “sensory prominence” (Banks, 2007). More importantly, art-based research informs and contributes to construction of knowledge (Harvey, Baker, Bosanquet, Coulson, Semple & Warren, 2012). Susan Goff is prepared to take it further than just construction of knowledge, to include epistemology, as the way we come to know what we know about ourselves and others (Goff, 2014). Due to violation of personal values, staff working in toxic organisations suffer from trauma, and art in itself has personal benefits, even though I am mindful that I am not working in a therapeutic environment or research project.

Neuroscience has demonstrated the links between art activities and cognitive and emotional functioning, and thus as a spinoff of generating data for analysis, art does offer a gentle, caring way for employees to express emotional baggage (Hass-Cohen & Carr, 2008). This gentle, caring, unobtrusive way of art fits in well with my ontological values of treating others as humanely as possible, within Martin Buber’s framework of I-thou relationships, which I dealt with in chapter 2. Semiotic analysis of signs and symbols and how they follow through in the drawing process is important in understanding, from a phenomenological perspective, the world view of the participants in communicating the meaning attached to the drawings.

Jack Whitehead’s (2009a) use of videos to demonstrate the flow of loving, affirming energy as educational explanations of our learning caught my attention when I started investigating a living theory approach to action research, and I cannot understand why this methodology has not generated more interest and critique. What I appreciate about Whitehead’s approach is that a video captures the change of emotions (voice – tone, volume, pitch) in facial expressions and

body language far more accurately than the written word can capture. Videos are not only accurate in capturing emotions, but are also a time-saving method of capturing emotions quickly and accurately compared to writing down text based on observations. In addition, videos are able to be replayed, and what may have missed the eye in the first view can be captured in the second or the tenth view. In this way, videos offer rich data for analysis. Where I would part company with Whitehead's emphasis is in the existential encounter between the viewer and the viewed, which confirms the emotional energy and its interpretation. When emotional resonance occurs, an emotional feeling is calibrated by the viewer as an arousal. Is the emotion that of the person viewed or the viewer? That to me is the unanswered question. It raises the age-old problem of hermeneutical interpretation, not of a text, but in this case of a visual stimulus.

Since mid-2013 I have kept a journal, in which I have made notes on my reflections and activities pertaining to my research. I found it useful to keep these entries, as they provide a historical record of what was happening at the college during the working week, and how my interaction with the ALS and/or my colleagues was unfolding, giving an account of how my values were being supported or denied, as well as the learning that was taking place. The journal entries were also useful, as I used them to reflect in my study group, which received research funding from the National Research Foundation (NRF). This group of master's and doctoral students met monthly for the members to reflect on their studies, and to support one another as critical friends. The benefit of these meetings was that they provided insights into how others were tackling their research, and I obtained feedback on the work I was doing. Our postgraduate supervisors facilitated the learning that emerged from the sessions of this group, and it became empowering, in that from this activity we were able to generate a published article. This was important for me as someone who was working in a dysfunctional environment, where as a manager, I was the toxic handler, who had to buffer the emotional conflicts that arose between colleagues and management, and between colleagues themselves. This role often left me feeling tired, physically and mentally, and to have a joint article emerge (see Wood, Seobi, Setlhari-Meltor & Waddington, 2015) was a real pick-me-up and encouragement, as it was a resourceful way of handling stress.

Pertinent documents that speak to my research topic that I have included in the data for analysis are minutes of standing meetings, such as meetings of the college council, college management, and HR divisions, dating back to 2009, as well as minutes and reports from a transformational task team established to deal with internal college matters, correspondence such as letters, memos, and emails from the office of the principal to staff, my own personal letters and reports to senior management, and written correspondence from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to the college.

These documents have been scanned and saved as PDF files and stored on a laptop and a standalone computer, and backups have been made onto an external hard drive. Likewise, all the video material has been secured for safekeeping. All computers have password protection, and the hard drive is locked away at home for safekeeping. The way I have approached these documents is to utilise a hermeneutical approach. During my years of studying liberation theology, I was influenced by using elements of Paul Ricœur's hermeneutics of suspicion, in order to expose ideologies lying behind the text. A normal reading of a text can be described as reading with the grain; by contrast, critiquing a text, treating it with suspicion, or mistrust, exposing what lies behind the text, is what is referred to as reading against the grain (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1993; Feiski, 2012). Reading a document from this perspective automatically places me as researcher in a critical paradigm, as I critique the text to expose the motives and the intention of the writer within the framework of ideology, power, and politics. The meetings of the action learning set were videotaped and transcribed.

#### **4.10 Coding and analysis**

Working with data in qualitative research has been described as both an art and a science (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), but it also contains elements of creativity, flexibility, and chaos (Hennink *et al.*, 2011:205). In this study, collages, narrative explanations of drawings, video reflections, semi-structured interviews, and action learning set meetings were transcribed and coded, checked and analysed, along with my personal bi-weekly journal and my monthly reflections. A simple set of coding protocols, borrowed from Hennink *et al.* (2011), were used by the action learning set participants and me to ensure trustworthiness. The coding and analysis included transcribing for an emic perspective (own verbatim words, without distortion or interpretation). Data collection and analysis were linked, where inductive reasoning was used to construct concepts. Comparison between constructed concepts and their source was also deployed. Reflection at a meta level on the coding and analysis deepened the study with regards to describing from a phenomenological perspective the experiences and behaviour of those experiencing toxicity in the workplace. The action learning set participated in much of the coding, and the members of the set signed their video transcripts, in order to confirm that the data captured was accurate, and to provide their permission for me to use the video clips in my study

#### **4.11 Trusting my data**

Claims to knowledge, particularly in a self-study, must be open to scrutiny and criticism (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010:16). This act of publishing the study, with its methodological processes, assumptions, and findings, is an important part of engaging in action research, so that the

output, the explanation, becomes a living theory of practice. In a self-study, I am mindful that as a self-reflexive exercise, subjectivity has to be curtailed, controlled, and examined in the light of valid criteria, even though I am producing my own living theory. This theorising is based on data. What the data is, whose data it is, how it was generated, and how it was analysed is important for the data to be validated, or, as I refer to it, to be truthful, and thus trustworthy. The data in this study, used in a qualitative paradigm, comes from varied sources, such as pictures, collages, videotaped activities with participants, narratives, video reflections, posters, semi-structured interviews, and documents, such as emails, memos, letters, reports, and minutes of meetings within the college domain. While I did not look for cause and effect (a quantitative approach), I, along with my participants, analysed the transcribed data for relationships and recurrent themes. The types of data, plus the fact that the data was generated from the action learning set, the employees at the corporate centre, and management, meant that we were working with multiple data sources, so we could triangulate (Calabrese, 2009:163), in order to reduce bias and produce knowledge that is trustworthy by using more than just one approach (Flick, 2011:186).

While triangulation is useful for confirmation purposes, crystallisation is helpful in ensuring thoroughness and rigour, as it seeks to “build a rich and diverse understanding of one single situation” (O’Leary, 2019:114). The fact that I use different sources, as I highlighted above, and that there is singularity in what is at the heart of the study, namely toxicity, even though it has three components, namely toxic leaders, toxic followers, and a toxic environment, lends itself to crystallisation. However, the answer to the question of trustworthiness is incomplete unless in developing a living theory I use my values as living standards of judgement. This I do, and I hope in the study, throughout the text and the videos, my ontological values of caring, respect, trust, participation, and inclusiveness are able to be observed and noted. The trustworthiness of my claims to knowledge is not in what I say, but in what I am, and the influences I have. Therefore, my improved practice as an HRD manager is directly linked to my ontology. I have often reflected on the thought that after four years of study, if I have not changed, and if my practice and skills set have not changed, then I will have a degree that is based on a paper exercise, and is worthless. By making my values, my living standards of judgement, transparent and available for public scrutiny, I move away from subjectivity to objectivity. In fact, I go so far as to say to my colleagues in the college: “Measure my improved practice and development against the life-enhancing values that the action learning set and I have identified.” However, I place these living standards of judgement within a framework borrowed from Herr and Anderson (2015:67), which uses the word “validity” not within a positivist paradigm, but with adjectives qualifying the word, to describe the type of validity. These five validity criteria that I use for my framework are (1) outcome validity, (2) process validity, (3) democratic validity, (4) catalytic

validity, and (5) dialogic validity and I explain how I used these to validate my claims in chapter 7.

Finally, my critical friends as peers in the research project Action Research for Community Engagement by Tertiary Institutions: Beyond Service Learning, sponsored by a grant from the National Research Foundation, played an important role in not only ensuring a sounding board for ideas, but also for their critique of what was happening in the field during the action learning and action research cycles. The concept of critical friends stems from Nuttall's writing in the 1970s, where it was applied to self-appraisal (Storey & Richard, 2015). I like the clarity in the way Storey and Richard (2015:418) refer to group dialogues of critical friends as initiated "with the purpose of making their practice explicit, discussable and transferable, thereby making learning central to critical friendship". I experienced this support, and I actively participated in the group meetings of my critical friends once a month, precisely for this reason, namely to support and critique what the researchers were engaging with in their studies.

#### **4.12 Ethics**

Ethical considerations in research are extremely important, particularly when dealing with people, as the researcher is obliged to demonstrate moral behaviour in the research process, and to ensure that no harm comes to self or participants (Wiles, 2013; Wiles & Boddy, 2013). In this study, I set parameters, so as not to wander off into any form of psychological diagnostic framework, as I am not a registered psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), even though my studies have included pastoral psychology and hypnotherapy. While emotions, relationships, and wellness have been at the heart of my phenomenological observations, I have not dealt with them in terms of psychological interventions, such as therapy, but have placed them within the area of values and communication.

Before the commencement of my study, and in line with ethical guidelines, I obtained permission to conduct my study within the college. Permission was requested in writing from the Principal at the time (Annexure A), and it was granted (Annexure B). Ethical approval was sought from the North-West University Institutional Research Ethics Regulatory Committee, within the project Action Research for Community Engagement by Tertiary Institutions: Beyond Service Delivery, under the leadership of Professor Lesley. Wood. The ethics approval certificate was granted in March 2013, with the Ethics Number NWU-00040-14-A2 (Annexure D). The ethical guidelines of the university were followed in this study.

An important aspect of ethics in research pertains to the participants themselves, and it includes obtaining informed voluntary consent and ensuring confidentiality. All my participants in the

action learning set were given written documentation explaining the processes that would be followed to ensure their confidentiality and privacy, and it was explained that videos would be made of proceedings and activities, and that the participants would be allowed to send video reflections. In addition, it was also stated that participants could withdraw from the study at any time, thereby making the whole research process one of voluntary participation, where participation would have no negative repercussions. All documentation from the action learning set was signed, filed, and securely locked in a filing cabinet in my office at home, for security purposes. In order to ensure confidentiality, a unique alphabetical code was allocated to each member of the action learning set, where the codes were known only to me, in order to avoid using names, which may lead to identification. When I used Open Space Technology on two occasions where all employees were invited, I explained before each meeting that I would be videotaping the proceedings, and that there were written documents, such as questions and evaluation statements, which would be part of my research. I also had each employee at these critical caring conversation café meetings voluntarily sign that they gave their consent to be videotaped, as well as permission for me to use any data generated as a result of their participation. In the text of this thesis, if I referred to any employee other than the members of my action learning set, who were allocated codes, I stated that the name of the person was withheld for reasons of anonymity and confidentiality.

I dealt with all my participants in a respectful, caring manner, in accordance with my ontological values, and I offered support, by sending them SMS messages, video clips, and short emails thanking them and encouraging them when times were tough and managers were being sapped of their emotional energy, such as during staff and student strikes. I also ensured that I could make use of a registered social worker at one of our campuses, who had agreed to assist if participants became negatively affected through their engagement with emotional baggage. My promoter, who is also a registered social worker with the HPCSA, offered to help with any debriefing, both for my participants and for me, as the researcher, as it is also important to safeguard the well-being of the researcher (Fahie, 2014:27).

#### **4.13 Summary**

Part of my learning during this study was to dance, so to speak, and sometimes to drag myself, through the minefield of emotional toxicity in the college, caused by toxic leaders, toxic followers, and a toxic environment (the “system”). This research would not have been possible unless my research design and methodology could withstand the effects and influences of the toxicity that I was trying to reduce through action research. When the context is of such a nature, as described in chapter 2, and is so fluid and changing, where employees’ relationships and agendas are continually changing, and where external influences dictate the activities of

staff within the organisation, it is difficult to keep within time frames that one has predetermined. For example, some members of my action learning set were transferred elsewhere, and others resigned from the college. While this did not affect the quality of the co-created data, it did affect data saturation, which took longer to achieve, as there ended up being fewer participants, who then each had to generate more data than would be the case if all the ALS members had remained in the study to its completion. Several student and staff strikes, as well as a number of unscheduled meetings brought about by migration of staff to the DHET, resulted in some scheduled ALS meetings having to be cancelled. My flexibility, being able to give and take, to negotiate, and to adapt made a difference to how the study was conducted. Having outlined with my methodology in this chapter I am now able to report on my own learning as an HRD manager. In the next chapter I give an account of my learning as an inside researcher located in a toxic organisation.

## **PART 2 CYCLES OF LEARNING AND CHANGE**

### **CHAPTER 5**

#### **MY LEARNING AS AN INSIDE RESEARCHER: GIVING ACCOUNT AS AN HRD MANAGER**

##### **5.1 Introduction**

In chapters 1-3 I gave an overview of this thesis, grounded myself in the context, and introduced my theoretical framework. In chapter 4 I foregrounded my research design and methodology against the background of the previously chapters. In part 2, I now give an account of my learning and improved practice as an HR manager, which influences my living theory of organisational development within a toxic organisation. My learning is grounded in the cyclical nature of action research.

In this chapter I focus on my own learning. I draw on the events, activities, and experiences that emerged during cycle 1 (challenging the system), cycle 2 (establishing and maintaining the action learning set), and cycle 3 (identification of life-enhancing values, finding a point of entry to influence change and implement advocacy and Open Space Technology), and I offer a systematic explanation of my enquiry. I also give an account of why I performed certain tasks and how they influenced my own learning. This approach outlined above is embedded within the framework of collaborative action research and engagement with the different theories outlined in earlier chapters.

My story is an account of my learning that began during the month of December 2012 while on vacation when I had more time to reflect on my life as an HRD manager and employee of the college where I was working. The college was, in my opinion, deteriorating as an institution. I was emotionally affected by the fact that I had recognised toxicity in the organisation previously, and had tried my best to do what I could in order to improve the situation, as a responsible HRD manager, but in many cases I had seen my efforts amount to nothing. For example, I had written an article for our college magazine about the negativity of gossip in the workplace, but senior management had refused to publish it, with the excuse that it may upset employees. I had also cautioned senior management regarding their offhand way of communicating with union officials. I had warned them against implementing a specific promotion scheme that was contrary to good HR practice, as it would reward incompetence and would demoralise competent staff. It seemed to me that I had not been taken seriously by senior management. In spite of my inputs, recommendations, and warnings, nothing had changed, and I felt side-lined as a manager. This resulted in disengagement on my part. I became less vocal and less intent

on getting things done correctly, and I distanced myself from active debates. I felt guilty about this approach, as it did not align with my sense of professional identity. My personality and work ethic is the exact opposite, attested to by the fact that I was awarded the prize for the most punctual and most positive employee in the corporate centre through employee votes in 2011. What had really worried me existentially was the fact that I found myself not only withdrawing, but also accepting the status quo.

I clearly remember thinking that I was being sucked into the toxic system of thinking prevalent in the college, which I described as a “couldn’t care less” attitude. This worried me. I was experiencing cognitive and emotional dissonance (Bakker & Heuven, 2006; Festinger, 1957; Festinger, Riecken & Schachter, 1956). One of the debates around dissonance is that it acts as a driver in order for the individual to find balance, or equilibrium, in their existence (Cooper, 1999). In my case, this was certainly the case. One night, while lying in bed with negative thoughts about the college going through my head, like a toxic virus, I experienced a tipping point (Gladwell, 2002). Burns and Worsley (2015:28) define a tipping point experience as follows: “A tipping point is where all the pressure is building and suddenly change happens. Tipping points describe the straw that breaks the camel’s back; the dam that breaks.”

I had reached that point. I could not go on as an HRD manager in the same way that I had in 2012. I had to improve my practice and influence others to improve their practice, before the college reached the stage that it had to be placed under administration, with the possibility of staff being fired or retrenched. This desire to improve my practice and influence my learning dovetails with my use of action research in order to produce a living theory. A factor that may have contributed to my experience of this dissatisfaction could have been my registration as a PhD student, and the work that I did on my proposal, which exposed me to action research, critical thinking, and the organisational development literature. The knowledge gained from the literature and from becoming more critical may well have increased the dissonance that I felt, as I weighed up what the college was, as a toxic organisation, compared to what a thriving organisation should be like. Nevertheless, I am aware of my own subjectivity in this regard at the time of experiencing this tipping point.

In order to track the thinking and the processes through the three cycles, I have included a summary in Table 5.1 below, adapted from Louw and Zuber-Skerritt (2011:298), which clearly indicates the major thrust of each cycle. This does not mean that I will use each element or statement to highlight my improved learning and/or improved practice as an HRD manager. What I will do, however, is to draw from these elements where I believe I can make a claim to knowledge.

**Table 5.1: Summary of action research cycles (2013-2015), adapted from Louw and Zuber-Skerritt (2011:298)**

<b>Cycle</b>	<b>Plan</b>	<b>Act</b>	<b>Observe</b>	<b>Learning on reflection</b>
Cycle 1	I wanted to disrupt the system by challenging workplace values	I delivered a presentation on values, and over a three-week period I conscientised staff on the importance of living according to personal values	The desired outcome was not obtained. The disruption (presentation) divided staff, and I was ostracised for raising personal and work values, and I had to desist.	Change involves risks, and it cannot be driven by one person, nor can it be a top-down strategy. I became aware of the need to engage a cohort of managers as participants in the change process.
Cycle 2	To identify and establish an action learning set to collaboratively challenge the toxicity of the college through enhancing values	Recruit action learning set members, co-generate data through visual methods and narratives, analyse data confirming toxicity in the workplace	Managers are hurting due to experiencing emotional trauma as a result of toxicity. Visual methods used while generating data played a cathartic role	Challenges exist in starting and maintaining an action learning set. Toxicity contributed to emotional trauma, which was reduced through the drawing exercises.
<b>Cycle</b>	<b>Plan</b>	<b>Act</b>	<b>Observe</b>	<b>Learning on</b>

				<b>reflection</b>
Cycle 3	Identify values that are to be enhanced, and disrupt the system by locating the point of entry for dialogic organisational development (OD) interventions	Prioritisation of identified values used for a poster campaign. Dialogic OD techniques such as Open Space Technology employed	The poster campaign on values assisted colleagues to find their voices reflected in the Critical Caring Conversation Café meetings	Dialogic OD leads to change in small incremental ways, starting with individuals and the change of conversations within the organisation

## 5.2 Cycle 1: Disrupting the system

In the first cycle I strategised that when I returned to college in January 2013, I was going to challenge the status quo head-on, by raising the issue of values. I was going to challenge the college's values statement by highlighting how we had drifted from living out these values, and where this was taking the college, namely down a slippery slope, rendering the college a dysfunctional institution of higher learning. My strategy was to do a PowerPoint presentation on values at the Monday morning meeting to all the corporate centre employees, and to carry that theme through the months of January and February in 2013. I have included two slides from my twelve-slide presentation below, which speak to me at an ontological level, as they represent my resolute determination to make a difference in my own life and the lives of others, just like Martin Luther.

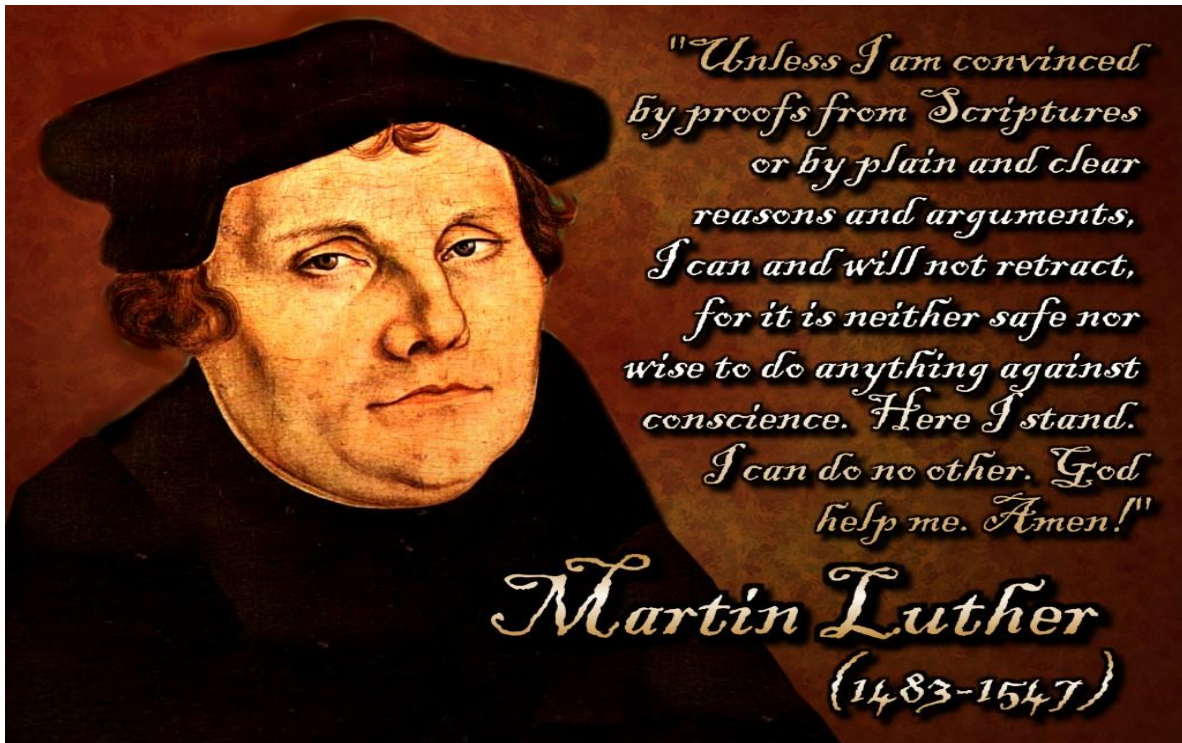


Figure 5.1: My tipping point – my stance on making a change

**WHAT ABOUT YOU?**

Where do you stand?

Are you prepared to be part of the transformation of Vuselela through values

I am wanting to join hands with colleagues, Managers, SMT, Unions and Council to make this happen

Just email me today – within the hour - to be a partner in transforming our college

Figure 5.2: The challenge to take action

The first slide, in Figure 5.1, while not being historically accurate, as the words “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me” were not part of Martin Luther’s original writing, nevertheless captures my feelings perfectly. I had reached a tipping point, and I had made up my mind that I wanted and needed personal change, and had decided to take action to contribute to the transformation of the organisational culture in the college. Hence, I sought to reduce my own dissonance and to increase the wellness of myself, colleagues, and the organisation. I made my position clear to fellow employees through this slide, of my compelling need to live out my values of respect, inclusiveness, accountability, and participation.

The second slide, in Figure 5.2, displays my ontological stance of inclusiveness and participation, both of which are values of an action researcher. However, when no one emailed a response, as I had requested, I began to feel quite despondent. I felt abandoned, exposed, and isolated as I tried to understand why no one had responded. Based on my own subjective perspective at that time, I started to wonder whether my desire for change was a personal desire based on a wrong bias, or whether it was real and justified. I was rescued from this negative self-talk in the afternoon of the presentation, when five colleagues individually came to my office and thanked me for speaking out and challenging the status quo and calling for change. I later asked three of the five colleagues who supported me to join the action learning set (the other two were not asked due to my colour and gender equity criteria, which I made explicit in my methodology chapter).

Now that I had some support, I asked the Principal if I could run a workshop titled “Living our Values”. He not only gave me permission to do the workshop at the corporate centre, but requested that I do so at all five of our campuses. Within a month of presenting the workshop at the corporate centre, while I had support from some employees, there was a noticeable cohort that complained about the need to explore their values, and they raised the issue with senior management. At the workshop I had given them a hand out that I had developed (Annexure F), for them to complete and keep in a drawer of their desk, so as to remind them of their values. I was hoping that through awakening an interest in their own values, they would join me in challenging the status quo and systems that conflicted with the college’s stated values (Annexure P). This attempt to contribute to change caused a division, which could only be described as passive-aggressive (Brandt, 2013; De Angelis, 2009), where a communication gap developed, as some colleagues became less friendly or were less communicative, and some avoided me completely. Once I stopped pushing for values at the Monday morning meetings, things reverted to normal.

I then reflected on why my actions had triggered resistance. The following aspects came to the fore: the process was top-driven, as I, as the HRD manager, drove the process; it was not inclusive – it was a manager’s idea, regardless of whether the idea was right or wrong. Furthermore, the process touched a raw nerve of what was happening, as values were violated in the workplace, and therefore the process was perceived as very personal. It was a request to look at their sense of being, their existence as employees, who they were, and how they were behaving. Values lie at the heart of who employees are, how they see themselves, and how meaning is derived at an existential level (Prasko, Mainerova, Jelenova, Kamaradova & Sigmundova, 2012). I regarded the PowerPoint presentation as an unobtrusive existential encounter, as I laid bare my values and took a stand. However, while some warmed to the presentation immediately, others perceived it as a direct challenge to their values, and therefore as intrusive.

I had the intention of transforming the college back into a values-driven organisation. This decision was based on three factors. Firstly, I had worked in a teachers training college, where values were important, as we had a professional approach to training future teachers for a profession. Secondly, while engaging with the literature on organisational development, I had adopted a values-driven approach to organisational development, which I dealt with in the chapter on my theoretical framework. Thirdly, values are at the core of action research, as they feed into ontological and epistemological choices. Nietzsche is purported to have said that if you want to know what a person’s philosophy is, then first ask “What are his values?” (Prasko *et al.*, 2012:9). Drawing on the logical levels of Diltz and Epstein (1995), who were in turn influenced by Bateson’s (2000) levels of learning, I understand that values and beliefs operate at a higher level than behaviour or skills. Hence, I maintain that values precede beliefs, and values and beliefs precede behaviour. Thus, my opting for a values approach to addressing the problem of toxicity, and my motivation to do something about the problem, dovetails with my choice of theories and my paradigmatic choices, which are foregrounded in my theoretical chapter (chapter 3) and my methodology chapter (chapter 4).

As evidence of the resistance to examine values, I present the following extract from my reflective diary: *“I have experienced negativity – lack of communication from some staff. It’s like they are ignoring me, and the vice-principal has indicated that staff don’t want me to deal with values on Monday mornings. I’m upsetting the apple cart”* (RPJ 1 (23/13)).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The code “RPJ” refers to my reflective personal journal as an inside researcher, where the code is followed by the journal entry and the date of the entry.

When I reflected on my planning, intervention, and analysis in this first cycle, I realised that my personality may have got in the way. I tend to be very forthright, and this trait has often been interpreted by colleagues as arrogance. It was a reminder to me to be culturally sensitive. I also realised that in order to bring about change, I could not be the only change agent – I would need to adopt a more participatory approach. I needed the commitment of employees who had already shown support for my attempt to challenge the status quo. These colleagues were what I referred to as my “Nicodemus”<sup>12</sup> followers, who contacted me in person, rather than by email. Such was the nature of toxicity in the college that these colleagues were afraid of victimisation, and so they did not want any electronic evidence of supporting me. This was later confirmed by a participant: *“I am still worried through this process that something that you said will come back to you [...] that’s the culture [...] it comes back to bite you”* (C:PRVJ:12/6/14<sup>13</sup>).

My subjective perceived failure of not bringing about any positive change, and the period of negativity that I experienced, prompted me to make a decision, namely either to abandon the project or to engage participants to travel with me on this journey to better health and well-being. My value system would not allow me to give up, and I decided to adopt a participatory approach that was congruent with my ontological stance. Hence, I realised that I needed to recruit an action learning set of committed managers to walk with me. The action learning set would fulfil the role of co-creators of knowledge, and agents in planning and reflecting upon strategies to address the toxicity that all were experiencing, and to take ownership of the change process. In this way, my colleagues would be improving their own practice, and influencing others to do likewise.

### **5.3 Cycle 2 (Establishing, maintaining, and co-generating data with the action learning set)**

I now turn to the second cycle of action research. In this cycle, there is interwoven a combination of what I planned on my own and what we as an action learning set planned together. As I needed to generate data for analysis in order to improve my practice, I needed a responsible and committed cohort to work with to determine how we could influence the adoption of more life-enhancing values.

Ten months after my first intervention as an attempt to change the organisational culture of the college, I ran the start-up meeting of the action learning set. This gap may seem long, but it was necessary to prepare well for the establishment of this group. I thought that it was vital to build

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<sup>12</sup> Nicodemus was a character in the Bible who was too afraid to approach Jesus in broad daylight, so he chose instead to visit him at night under cover, so as not to be detected. See John 3:1.

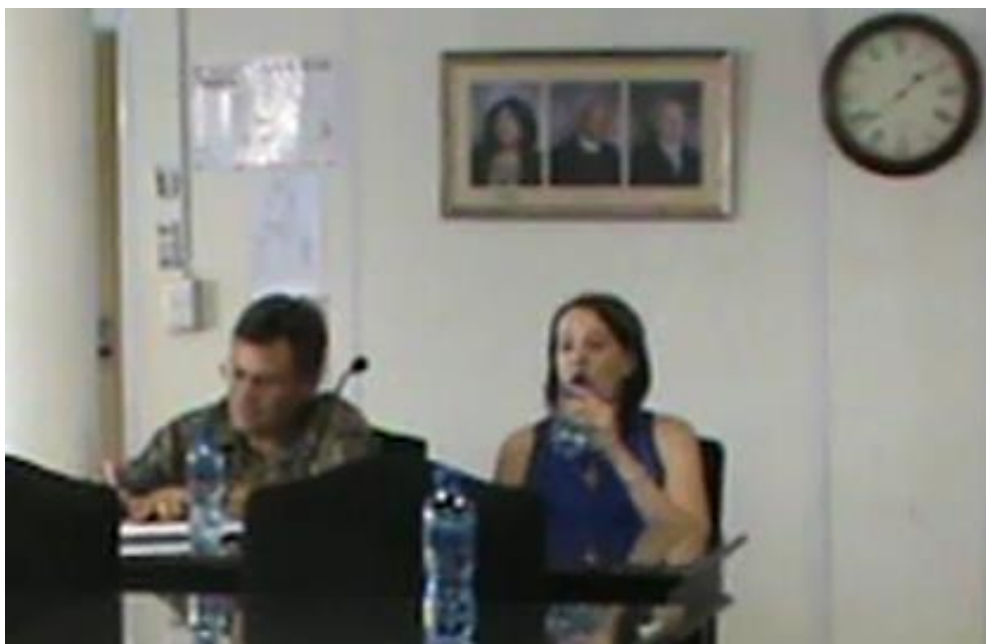
<sup>13</sup> In the code C:PRVJ:12/6/14 C stands for the participant, PRV stands for personal reflective video which is followed by the date.

trust, gain buy-in, and build rapport with each group member, as the basis for any sound cooperation. During this ten-month preparation period, I discussed my studies with potential participants, and I continually tested the waters, obtaining the views of potential participants on what could be done to bring about change and to challenge the toxic systems, leaders and followers that were violating the right of employees to live out their life-enhancing values. This process of gathering information over a lengthy period speaks to the toxicity that exists in the college. I had myself learnt that to survive in organisational toxicity meant that employees would align themselves with power bases of either union representatives or top management in order to feel safe in the workplace. I addressed this matter in a paper drawn from this study, presented at the Education Association of South Africa conference held at Golden Gate, South Africa in 2014 (Annexure G).

However, within this negativity I found a group of like-minded managers who wanted change within the organisation, and wanted healing for themselves and their colleagues. My reflection in my personal journal captures the excitement at laying a solid foundation for my action learning set: *“On the 27<sup>th</sup> November 2013 I had my start-up meeting with my ALS [action learning set]. It was a great experience to see that all my rapport-building had paid off. All are excited and ready to go into action”* (RPJ 12 (30/11/13)).

I came away encouraged that the action learning set members knew exactly what was required of them, and that a good spirit of comradeship had been displayed by the members. I explained at the meeting what action research entailed, how a living theory is produced, what action learning sets contribute to the process of action research, and what my research question focused on, namely the toxicity that I experienced, as suggested in the literature, and particularly in Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser’s (2007) model of the toxic triangle, as explained in chapter 3. I also went through the role of the action research members, as well as the ethics of doing research, and I handed out the voluntary informed consent forms (Annexure C). I explained the forms in detail, and all the members indicated that they understood the content, and they voluntarily signed the forms, which I then collected and scanned for later retrieval.

I believe that Video clip 5.1 that follows captures the energy flow in the room at the start-up meeting of the action learning set. I feel the energy from the smiles, laughter, banter, and excitement in the room, which indicate an expectation to have fun in the meeting.



**Video clip 5.1: Start-up meeting (*Hover cursor over picture and a text box appears with instructions - ctrl + click –if using MSWord this applies to all other video clips*)**

This flow of energy, excitement, and happiness is in complete contrast to what is experienced by these action learning set members in their everyday working lives, where they are stressed and are often bullied by colleagues and students, as they work in a college that is toxic. Video clip 5.1 expresses a moment in a created space where an atmosphere of support, caring, and hope exists. In my experience, this is like a breath of fresh air, which is life-enhancing. The action learning set meetings were characterised by such spaces, where members could step back, relax, reflect, and experience support from the relationships within the group, where they felt solidarity and experienced trust in a non-judgemental atmosphere. I believe the space that I created as an inside researcher illustrates my ontology of caring for others.

### **5.3.1 Forming an identity**

Once the action learning set was formed (see chapter 4 Table 4.1), we needed to establish an identity. I wanted to use a nominal group technique (NGT) (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt, 2008; Harvey & Holmes, 2012) to settle on a logo (see Annexure H) and a name for the action learning set. I wanted the action learning set to learn new skills and techniques, and the NGT was useful for the following reasons. Firstly, it is useful when time is limited to gain consensus. Secondly, it prioritises elements fairly and in a democratic way, where all the action learning set members' votes count equally. Thirdly, it ensures full participation of all members. Through this NGT process of logo and name choosing, I believe we were able to cement relationships within the group, find a common purpose, and create an identity for the group. Each member of the group designed or found an image, which they submitted, and I displayed a total of 10 images

on a TV screen to the entire group. Utilising the participatory approach in the NGT process, where each member explained their choice of logo, gave members the opportunity to express what they thought about the nature of the group and the purpose for its existence. We then followed the democratic process of ranking logos, so as to agree on an acceptable logo. The results of this activity are shown in Figure 5.3 below.



**Figure 5.3: The logo accepted for the Curatio ALS**

The circle indicates the oneness of the group, bound together in the action learning set. The blue background indicates the sky, where there are no limits to what the activity within the set can reach. The hands of different colours linked together indicate the diversity of the group and the strength to support each other and the college. The negative shape between the hands represents a star that can guide and be a reference point in the journey from toxicity to healing.

Incidentally, it was not a logo that I would have chosen, and I found this humbling. I learnt a lot about myself and my personality from this exercise. I was not used to taking a back seat and allowing a democratic process to unfold without trying to influence the outcomes through verbal engagement and argumentation if I was convinced I was right. The learning I gained from this experience was that I wrongly believed I was innocent. I believed I was humble, not pushy, and easy-going, and yet I felt a strong urge to argue why the logo was weak and not the best choice for my research. I had to re-evaluate my relationships and values, so as to be a participative researcher and allow democratic processes to unfold. Video clip 5.2 captures the participatory process of the NGT, which supports inclusiveness, where no participant's voice is ignored.



### **Video clip 5.2: Nominal group technique for choice of a logo**

Choosing a name was easier than choosing a logo, as only one name was put forward. The group accepted the name “Curatio”,<sup>14</sup> as it spoke to why we were committed to the group, namely that we cared for the college, and we did not want it to deteriorate any further. Secondly, the name “Curatio” also covered our ontological values of caring for the employees that we are responsible for as managers in the institution. Finally, the name indicates our caring for one another within our action learning set. I had the logo and the name embroidered on the top left pocket on T-shirts of certain colours, according to the preferences of each respective member.

### **5.3.2 Co-generation of data through visual methods**

The emotional toxicity that I had experienced was confirmed and validated by the action learning set members. The participants agreed to participate in video narratives and drawing exercises as a method to co-create data. The analysis of the data confirmed that Padilla et al.’s (2007) model of the toxic triangle, as described in chapter 3, was a useful theoretical lens for perceiving what was really transpiring in the college. I have explained that drawings as a method in action research were not used only to generate data, but also to create a safe space for dealing with emotions and trauma (Schouten, De Niet , Knipscheer, Kleber & Hutschemaekers, 2015). Participants drew two collages on unbleached calico using wax crayons.

I drew a river and explained that symbolised a timeline and I indicated that I wanted the participants to link their negative traumatic experiences to the timeline, using either bank of the

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<sup>14</sup> *Curatio* is a Latin word which carries the meaning of caring, a curator, a looking after something of value, taking responsibility.

river. I participated in the drawing activity with my colleagues as a participant-researcher. The prompt that I gave to start the drawing was the following:

Go back to a time and place when you experienced toxicity, whatever it was. Fully associate with it, as if it were happening right now. Smell the smells, see what you saw, hear what you heard, feel what you felt, and without getting stuck, start drawing using shapes, colours, images, whatever you like, to capture your experience, right now. Start.

My understanding, based on my practice as a pastoral counsellor, is that trauma is experienced not so much by virtue of the event (e.g. an assault, a hijacking, a rape, an accident, etc.), but from the fact that the values that the individual holds dear have been violated (e.g. respect, self-worth, dignity, trust, etc.). Hence, what I was expecting to be achieved from the first drawing exercise was an association with the event, mediated by the drawing, which can lessen the impact of the emotional recall, and then later, when members are in a position to narrate and explain their drawings, it would be a double dissociation, making it even easier for them to discuss emotional and traumatic experiences. Immediately after the drawing exercise, I held a debriefing session, to ensure the well-being of all members. I explained how the senses stimulate recall, and how the thoughts and experiences are experienced in the body due to mind muscle memory (Finlayson & Richter, 2013). Hence, while completing the exercise, they had an opportunity to reflect on how they felt physically and emotionally during the experience. The drawing activity was video-recorded, as well as the narrative of what they had drawn. I have included a video clip 5.3 below, which was taken at the generation of the first collage. Pictures were also taken of each drawing, and the pictures were stored digitally (Annexure I). I had expected that the members were affected by the toxicity within the college. However, I was surprised by the prevalence and the severity of the trauma experienced.

I was surprised, in spite of the clarity in the literature on art therapy (Edwards, 2014; Schouten *et al.*, 2015), to see how the members expressed deep traumatic experiences within the group of managers, where at other times there is often a positive competitiveness and rivalry amongst the members. The members were able to shake off any sense of vulnerability and expose their true feelings, despite having deep-seated feelings of anxiety. This was a courageous act on their part, as was expressed by a member of the action learning set in a reflection of the drawing process:

*I felt reluctant to do the exercise, because in the group I did not feel comfortable with really sharing my honest opinions regarding how I feel, because in our environment*

*doing something like that can be very detrimental to your career, so it was a real challenge to be honest in front of people, saying exactly how you feel. (E:PRJ: 27/8/14<sup>15</sup>)*

For me, the success of the exercise is evident from the fact that even though the member felt vulnerable, he was able to overcome his personal fears and take the risk of trusting others and verbalising the emotions and feelings that he was carrying. I think the following video clip 5.3 captures the relational aspect of members interacting while digging deep into their emotional trauma. I can now claim that artistic expression such as drawing collages creates a safe space for colleagues in the workplace to address emotional issues, while generating data in a participative manner.



**Video Clip 5.3 Collage 1 (Deep-attention-to-drawing activity)**

The time in the video clip 5.3 when there is no verbal communication is the time when action learning set members are in deep reflection, accessing thoughts, images, sounds, smells, tastes, and physical sensations that are linked to emotions, which are, in turn, bound to the traumatic experience. I observed that members are in what psychology literature refers to as “the flow”, or “the zone” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). One of the elements of flow is characterised by a moment of deep concentration, where people are deeply focused, and inward-looking, oblivious to the outside world. When there is movement that grabs their attention, such as a person walking across the calico, as depicted in the video, or when someone speaks, they break out of this state, and their conscious attention is engaged by what is going on in their social space, and they engage so that they can interact with fellow colleagues.

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<sup>15</sup> In the code E:PRJ: 27/8/14 where E stands for the participant and PRJ refers to their personal reflective journal followed by the date of entry.

Each member was given an opportunity to explain or narrate to the group their experiences of trauma captured in their drawings. One of the members who had not done a drawing due to not being at college for a while, was noticeably moved by the explanations and drawings. She also expressed that she wanted to comment on the process, and she did so in the following words, captured on video and recorded in my personal journal: *“Emotions of empathy and sympathy ran through my body, because of hearing how other people felt”* (IPRJ: 19/8/14).

Suffice it to say that colleagues in the action learning set had been traumatised in the workplace. However, by having the opportunity to engage with their trauma and emotions through art, and to further verbalise these emotions by talking openly to others about them, helped them to express deep negative feelings. I closed the meeting by summarising and thanking my colleagues for their candid explanations and willingness to reveal their innermost feelings to one another. I further explained that this was a step in cementing long trusting relationships within the group. Below is a summary of the verbal and visual communication associated with the traumatic events, the emotions experienced, and the values that were violated, or the needs that were neglected. The responses of each member are represented by a different colour.

**Table 5.2: Summary of the first collage**

<b>Event</b>	<b>Emotions</b>	<b>Values and needs</b>	<b>Drawings/symbols</b>
Disruption by the trade union Removal of a manager	Upset, uneasy Anxious, uneasy	Respect Transparency	A snake in the grass – something ominous was happening
World Cup soccer tournament	Hope followed by uncertainty	Inclusiveness Cohesion	A soccer ball
A lack of direction/leadership	Unsure	The need for Transparency	A bus without a driver, No road map, no wheels, no steering wheel
Power of Council	Anxiety, stress, uncertainty	The need for empowerment The need for communication, transparency,	A cross little man (section fear of Council)

		openness, and trust	
Migration <b>Event</b>	Uncertain Unsure Threatened <b>Emotion</b>	The need for transparency and openness <b>Values and Needs</b>	Another bus, no driver, no steering wheel, no road map <b>Drawings/Symbols</b>
Migration New beginning	Happy and hopeful, but unsure	The need for security	A happy face, rain "Yippee!"
Migration Unknown future	None stated	Inclusiveness Transparency	A 'broken road', and a cloud (?)
Lack of support for managers	Harassed, victimised Trapped between management and unions	The need for transformation The need for transparency – something "cooking" underground A violation of principles	A pot cooking, a fire – heat Expansion, causing the pot to burst The pot is smoking at both sides
Transformation task team – "me versus them"	None stated	'Values compromised'	A red lady versus blue men
"Big Brother" rules	Anxiety, false guilt, the feeling that one is not valued	The need for empowerment	A big eye – "Big Brother"
Management forced structures	Anxiety, not valued, false guilt, instability	The need for certainty The need for transformation	"R 191" – the symbol for the curriculum
Management rules not enforced	Helpless, anxious, not valued	The need for authority	The *80% Rules symbol
The decision to purchase AAA farm (the name of farm)	The feeling that one has no influence Anxious, not valued	The need for empowerment, trust, and inclusiveness	Maize, and the symbol \$ A red cross
The death of the Principal	Instability, anxiety	Transparency	A roadside memorial with the inscription

<b>Event</b>	<b>Emotions</b>	<b>Values and needs</b>	<b>Drawings/symbols</b>
			"RIP"
Difficult to manage No progress	Anxiety, not valued	The need for clarity, goals, and transparency	Feet – one going left, and three going right
The financial impact	Uncertainty, anxiety, false guilt, not valued	The need for transparency, trust, participation, and inclusiveness	Two boxes – one showing resources, and the other a big "NO" Money and an empty box
No stability in transforming sector due to migration	Traumatized, insecure due to constant change	The need for transparency	A pot is on fire
The first day (at college) – no support(	Frantic, nervous, upset, abandoned	Respect Dignity	A lady with her hands on her head
Becoming part of the management team	Disrespected Bullied, demotivated Despondent, frustrated	The need for respect	A round table, and an ear
Acting as head	(De)motivation	Participation, inclusiveness in the past	Herself sitting on the chair, as head
Financial constraints	Undermined Hurt	The need for empowerment The need for concern for others	Building made of asbestos
Start of employment at the college	None stated	The need for trust	A tree is planted
Staff are excited	None stated	The need for a common purpose	Excitement – the World Cup soccer tournament
Resistance to taking over campus as acting	None stated	Trust	A big hole

manager			
Recruitment to remove you, with no support from management	Discouraged, hurt	Trust	A face with a caption A disruption
A strike and a disruption	Uneasy	Participation, Transparency	“Amandla!” Striking people walking past a window
Moving all managers to same salary level	Victimised Humiliated	Trust, dignity, respect for human rights	A chain and a mouse on a desk
Unfairness in disciplinary cases	Anger, dissonance	The need for fairness, transparency, equality, and professionalism	A car crash, a lawnmower, a petrol card
A lack of justice, Transformation task team offered no protection or support	Devastating, heart-breaking	The need for transparency The need for dignity	The scales of justice, with a wolf underneath
The purchase of AAA farm	Frustrating	Participation Inclusiveness	The N12 road A mouth being covered
The migration process	Frustration, fear, anxiety	The need for participation, communication, and equality	A cake – a celebration, but halved Also, a crocodile in the river
Becoming a campus manager for equity reasons	The feeling of being doubted	The need for empowerment, trust, and Honesty	The code “MCM”
Receiving an offer to manage another campus	The feeling of being used	The need for transparency and trust	The code “MJC”

Through an analysis of the data that we co-created and coded, the following themes were developed, which will be addressed in the final chapter, as part of a verification process of determining the extent of disruption of communication (and the causes thereof), as the common factors that have led to emotional stress and trauma:

1. Emotional trauma is prevalent amongst managers;
2. When values are violated, it impacts negatively on communication;
3. When values are violated, it leads to experiences of trauma; and
4. Drawing activities play a therapeutic role in dealing with trauma.

The second collage was created a few months later, as I did not want to have any associations between the emotional negativity of the first collage drawing and the second positive collage, which allowed the action learning set members to project images of hope. The reason I wanted the second collage to focus on hope is that “hope underlines purpose driven action” (Lopez, 2014:16). Similarly, Snyder characterises hope as a vital principle, a life-sustaining force (Snyder, 2003). I further align myself with Lopez’s view that hope matters, that it is a choice, that it is learnt, and that it can be shared (Lopez, 2014:17). The first collage allowed participants to voice their toxic experiences and understand how they had been affected. I now needed to move away from the negative experiences in the workplace, and towards an envisaged positive future. In so doing, I was offering hope. Hope offers an orientation towards the future. Hope is associated with the idea of “not yet accomplished”, even though the process may have started. It links with my notion of becoming, as informed by Alfred North Whitehead’s (1979) process philosophy, as I discussed in chapter 2. Hope as a process has fulfilment in a future event, activity or accomplishment. I was offering the action learning set members the opportunity to express their hopes for a better, changed college, which is less toxic. The action learning set members were briefed that having dealt with the toxicity, and having analysed the data generated in the drawings and the narrative reflections, they now had an opportunity to use their imagination to express how they envisaged a workplace where life-enhancing values could be practised, rather than violated. The prompt for this drawing exercise was as follows:

Go inside, rely on your creativity, experience, and knowledge, and dream of what you would want to see happen that will reduce the toxicity and allow you to live out your life-enhancing values. Now draw using colours, shapes, and slogans to capture your response to the prompt. Don’t think too much. Get going. Get the first ideas down in picture form. You can also add to or edit your work as you go on. Draw as many drawings as necessary for you to express your feelings.

Once again, pictures were taken of each individual’s drawings, and they were saved digitally (see Annexure J). After the drawings were completed, the members narrated what they had drawn to the group, and the narratives were video-recorded. The narratives were transcribed

and coded and analysed by the action learning set. From the drawings, narratives, and reflections of the two collages, the action learning set had two reference points, and they could now plan on how to move from where they were (the first collage: toxicity) to where they wished to be (the second collage: wellness). During the analysis of the data created from the drawing exercise, a summary was made, which I have included below in Table 5.3. The responses of each member are represented by a different colour.

**Table 5.3: Summary of the second collage<sup>16</sup>**

Desired outcome	Emotions	Values and needs	Drawings/symbols
Management by objectives A new college A new council Good communication Meeting the client's needs	Feeling positive Excitement Leadership	Respect for others Equal treatment Self-respect Inclusiveness	A Ferrari winning a race
Migration to the DHET	Hope	None stated	A fish in a stream
Migration to the DHET	Unsure – a little confusion – but hope	None stated	A tunnel
To be one (unified) Improve as a team United	Hope	Transparency Sharing Unity in diversity	The sun, and a rainbow
Acting as head	(De)motivation	No participation or inclusiveness in the past	Sitting on the chair, as head
Working hard, and reaping the fruits of our labours	Hope	Participation	A spade, and a tree with fruit ripening
Reaching our goals	Happy at our achievement	Inclusiveness (all of us included)	A fruit tree
A college with hope	Hope	Justice Fairness	Two people with a balance scale, dancing

<sup>16</sup> The colours in the table are allocated to the different participants as part of the coding methodology.

			under the sun
<b>Desired outcome</b>	<b>Emotions</b>	<b>Values and needs</b>	<b>Drawings/symbols</b>
The past is buried, and is replaced with growth Proper communication	Hope Positivity	Inclusiveness	A buried coffin, sunshine, and two birds chirping
A winning, loving, caring, non-racial workplace	Hope	Inclusiveness Trust	A stretcher and two nurses, with the word "Care" written on the stretcher. Black, brown and white stripes, showing diversity.
The start of the year, and a birthday	None stated	Inclusiveness	A happy face
Working together	Happy at achieving our targets	None stated	A snow ball
Unrest and toyi-toyiing (The toyi-toyi is an African expression of protest dancing and singing songs during a strike)	None stated	We are not talking to each other, but we need to listen to each other if we are to improve our communication Inclusiveness	An unhappy principal and people
Working together	Happy Hopeful	Inclusiveness and participation	King Arthur's round table
Improvement	None stated	None stated	A percentage sign
Focused	Hope	Inclusiveness	A magnifying glass
Work-focused	Happiness	Participation and inclusiveness	Someone sitting at a desk, talking on a cell phone
Survivors	Feeling like a winner	Inclusiveness	The logo of the <i>Survival</i> television series

While communication is not a value it was identified by the group as the key component in mitigating toxicity. Communication (a lack or a distortion of communication, partial communication, or miscommunication) was linked to the experience of toxicity. Communication was thus seen not only as central to the problem of toxicity, but also as a point of entry (this is the application of complexity theory and chaos theory to organisational development, discussed in chapter 3) into the change process of organisational development.

### **5.3.3 Maintaining the action learning set**

From mid-October 2014 until the second week in January 2015, I was not able to engage with the action learning set due to a health-related problem, a visit to the United Kingdom in November to deliver a paper at a conference, and the college vacation over the December–January period. This period of inactivity of the action learning set worried me, as I stated in my journal:

*I am worried about the ALS. I have not sent emails while in the UK and was in hospital (3 times) before I left. I have just gone back and checked that the last time I met with them was 56 days ago. That's not good for rapport. I am worried for a number of reasons, such as (i) teams can lose focus, (ii) teams can lose energy, and (iii) members may get involved in other outside activities and lose interest. (RPJ 3 (10/11/14))*

The inactivity and lack of engagement of the action learning set did have consequences, as I had expected: *“My fears about the ALS are not unfounded. I am battling to get them to come together – I don't think it's just because it's year end and we close in 7 days” (RPJ 38 (2/12/14)).*

My worry about the action learning set lasted until February of 2015 before I could implement a strategy to get the learning set back on track. I captured this in my journal in February 2015, where I planned to use a video clip about chaos theory, recorded from the BBC4 programme titled “It's Only a Theory” (Video Clip 5.4 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPbExSYcQgY>), in the following way:

*The ALS meeting that I had planned for last month just did not materialise [...] I eventually managed to get a meeting together on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February at the corporate centre. As I had already strategised as to how I would rekindle the spark that we had before, I put my plan into action. We had a time when I could replay a clip, as I wanted to get association going of the good times we had in 2014, by playing the video again on chaos theory from YouTube, with, I think, Andy Hamilton and Prof. Chris Budd on BBC*

*explaining chaos theory [...] I went through a number of videos, and chose this particular one for the presentation, based on the criteria that I had believed needed to be met, namely (1) it must cover the topic adequately, (2) it must not be more than 15 minutes long, (3) it must be of good visual and audio quality, (4) it must, if possible, be equity-sensitive – not only males or only whites, (5) it must be transferable to OD and the college in terms of the principles being discussed. Chris Budd's video covered all these, BUT then it also added to my learning of how to engage with the ALS, and that was through the humour that it had embedded in the content. This humour was what was needed for the ALS. The humour lightened the spirit, had people laughing once again [...] I came out of this meeting knowing that we were back on track and ready to go. (RPJ 40 (12/2/15))*

I have extracted these journal entries, as I want to highlight that working with action learning sets is wonderful, empowering, enriching, and supportive, but not necessarily easy. There were times during my six months of chemotherapy that I felt physically tired and could easily have postponed the action learning set meetings, but I chose not to do so, as I believe I have a commitment to my members, and am obliged to do my best to help them in their learning, as they have committed themselves to me and to the project. Later in the chapter I will draw out my learning from working with participants in action learning sets, in order to co-create data for analysis purposes.

#### **5.4 Cycle 3: Identifying values and implementing strategies**

The third cycle was a direct consequence of the action learning set being motivated enough to say “What can we do as members of the action learning set about the toxicity that we have felt and we have expressed through the visual drawing activities, and how do we want to move to a place of wellness?” Put differently, how can we, as a cohort of managers, engage in organisational development to the benefit of employees, while in the process improving our own practice as managers and learning experientially?

The group decided to focus on four values. Out of the 10 values that were identified that are neglected in the workplace, thereby affecting communication and leading to toxicity, the values of trust, inclusiveness, transparency, and participation were prioritised for the sake of expediency. If I had not changed my practice as an HRD manager and opted for chaos theory and dialogic organisation processes in trying to bring about change, I would have probably agreed that we needed wellness day activities to relieve workplace stress, build team spirit, and improve the wellness of the employees and the organisation. This I had done previously, with little or no success, as shown in the images in Figure 5.4 below.



**Figure 5.4: Wellness day activities**

The montage in Figure 5.4 above reminds me of how traditional approaches to improving wellness did not work in a toxic environment, and it is testimony to my learning and improved practice as an HRD manager. Traditional diagnostic models based on Lewin’s (Cummings, Bridgman and Brown: 2016) “unfreeze, change, freeze” model (cf. chapter 3), which are included in some early action research models, do not necessarily work in toxic organisations. However, action research is constantly evolving. Consequently, I have used the approach of action research in this study, I have identified the limitations of Lewin’s model, and I have developed PAR and PALAR, for example, to ensure that at least the investigation of how to bring about change is not done by an individual, but is done in a participative way, drawing in the views and commitment of all participants. Hence, in participatory action research, the emphasis is on active participation, as well as on open-ended objectives (Morales, 2016:159).

Secondly, action research more recently has emphasised that “one size does not fit all”, and that what may work in one context may not work in another context. This acceptance of various different ways of addressing problems is due to underlying paradigm changes within the field of action research. Bushe’s (2011) attempt to bring in a further development within action research, by introducing dialogic organisational development theory, is an attempt to build on positive psychology and complexity theory, and to utilise appreciative inquiry. Previously, as an HRD manager, I had used a diagnostic approach and had opted for a so-called solution from a “basket” of recommended tools and techniques by organisational development experts to remedy the problem and bring about change. For example, as indicated in the montage in Figure 5.4, I organised sports events, went so far as to acquire a scooter as a lucky draw prize for employees who voluntarily tested for HIV as part of a wellness drive, included team-building (Olson & Eoyang, 2001) exercises in order to improve the organisational culture, and ran workshops on the “one-minute manager”,<sup>17</sup> to improve productivity and leadership. In spite of

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<sup>17</sup> I developed a one-day workshop based on the concept of the one-minute manager, developed by Blanchard, Oncken and Burrows (1989), which was aimed at improving productivity through communication channels that allowed instructions and emotions to be communicated in a clear and precise way that was not offensive, and that would not result in conflict.

these activities, the toxicity remained, and colleagues continued to suffer hurt and trauma in the workplace. When I reflect on these traditional approaches to bring about organisational change and to improve wellness, I now realise that I was concentrating on symptoms, and not the causes of the toxicity. The exercise as outlined in the first cycle had changed my views on organisational development so that I have altered my belief and operating system, which is reflected in my current practice. It was the data co-created and analysed by the action learning set that influenced this paradigm shift with regard to organisational development on my part as an HRD manager.

We explored the values identified by the group, namely trust, participation, inclusiveness, and empowerment, to gain an understanding of how these values related to improving communication. In our discussions about and brainstorming of these values, we came to realise that when these values are violated, communication is negatively affected, so that at the time there was a lack of communication, distorted communication, and false information being communicated within the workplace between managers and subordinates, and between colleagues, which led to toxicity.

### **5.5 My learning from the various cycles**

The first personal learning that I extract from my intervention in the first cycle in organisational development and insider research is the risk factor (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Sikes & Potts, 2008). Risk at this point does not relate to bias on the part of the researcher; rather, it relates to exposing what is happening within the organisation. It relates to the unmasking, unearthing, exposing, or laying bare of sensitive information that has been hushed by ignorance, fear, or alliance with systems of power. I like the way Smyth and Holian (2008:39) capture what I experienced as a risk: “exposing previously undiscussable issues, disturbing arrangements that serving particular people or purposes, confronting others with less than welcome observation regarding organisational practice and surfacing and naming dilemmas”.

When I exposed and named the problem of not being able to live out life-enhancing values, I found myself isolated from my colleagues, as they did not want to upset the status quo, even though they were suffering as a result of toxic behaviours that had taken root because of values being violated. This exposure caused a further risk, in the sense that it now divided employees in three ways, namely those who wanted change, but were too afraid to do or say anything about it, those that were beneficiaries of unethical practices and supported structures that maintained the toxic environment, and those that neither benefited from the toxic structures nor wanted to engage in challenging the process. The latter wanted to play the neutral role of

observers. The observer group could not support my efforts, as this would place them at odds against those in power, with the related fear of negative consequences.

Action research as a methodology has been reluctantly acknowledged as an “onerous and risky business” (Lewin, 1946, in Adelman, 1997:87), and as both “costly and risky” (Groundwater-Smith & Irwin, 2011:60). The underlying assumption is that people do not easily embrace change, for various reasons, that they need motivating, nurturing, and support in order to develop and sustain relationships, and that they do not want to jeopardise these relationships. When I speak about risk in the context of a toxic organisation, I am referring to the relationship that the inside researcher has within the organisation. There is always the risk that employees may sabotage the efforts of the researcher or those of the action learning set, as they are change agents, and change is not always wanted or accepted, as it takes people out of their comfort zone.

By applying my use of complexity theory and chaos theory, a further risk identified as part of my learning is the unknown. Due to the complex nature of an organisation, where the dynamics are in a continual state of flux, and where chaos exists, it is impossible to predict the outcome of any intervention, as nothing is stable. Dialogical organisation theory helped me to understand that the outcomes of any process are self-determining, and that the outcomes will self-organise and emerge if we ensure that the conversations in the workplace are changing. The key is to change or shift the conversations. Relinquishing control is not an easy lesson to learn, particularly if one works within a bureaucratic system of control, such as a state institution, like the college, where as a manager you are expected to uphold the norm. In practice, it means that the conversations change, so that the hierarchical control is flattened, so as to allow for a more participative role in decision-making. This change to a more democratic leadership and management style is not what toxic managers want to hear, as many have been identified as having a narcissistic personality (Alemu, 2016; Doty & Fenlason, 2013; Goldman, 2009; Kets de Vries, 2014). The bureaucratic organisational structure found in state institutions supports and is conducive to such types of behaviour, and it becomes an enabler, and thus toxic, as a system of maintaining hierarchical power.

The second personal learning shift that I made in relation to my practice is that I abandoned the idea that I can do organisational development on my own. This notion of being a change agent acting independently was fostered by my diagnostic view of consultancy. In the past, much of OD practice in organisations was outsourced, but in recent years there has been a shift towards using internal consultants, hence the move towards coaching (Lacey, 1995). Outsourcing relies

heavily on the idea that an external consultant is not tainted by or caught up in the internal climate, and thus has “fresh eyes” to see what is really going on within the organisation.

If an organisation has problems internally that need changing, and it has not been able to make the changes itself, then a number of conclusions can be drawn. Either the organisation does not really know what the problem is and/or the source of the problem, or it has tried to “fix” the problem and has failed, and therefore it has called in a consultant to do the work and get it right, or it does not have the time or the expertise to carry out the change process. This practice of outsourcing in the latter part of the last century has been challenged on the basis that it costs too much (De Klerk, 2012), it is not measurable in terms of impact, it often causes more harm than good, and it takes a long time to bring about change (Kahnweiler, 2013). In the college environment, it is not that the organisation’s leadership or employees do not know what they want in terms of transformation and development; rather, it is a case of being stuck, trapped in the system, and in our case, in a toxic environment. This knowledge of what one wants in terms of transformation is confirmed by how little time was spent on the second collage, and the brevity of the narratives about what was drawn, when I compare the two collages that were drawn by the participants. The second collage drawing process went quickly. It was almost like the action learning set members did not need time to think about what they aspired to, or what they wanted; it was as if they intuitively knew what they wanted. This was in contrast to the first collage, where the members spent much time deep in thought as they drew their pictures. The members knew where they had been in the first collage, and they moved rapidly to where they wanted to be in the second collage. In industry, consultants are brought in to undertake a diagnostic analysis of the problem, and to come up with strategies on how to change the problem, so that the emphasis is on processes of change, hence the proliferation of change management literature (Taylor, 2012:166).

It is evident that the positivist paradigm is the rationale behind such perspectives, as this paradigm perceives the organisation as a machine, or as a biological entity. Nevertheless, whichever paradigm is used, a diagnosis (by an expert) is made based on scientific diagnostic tools and expertise, where there is a blueprint to correct every problem or ailment that the organisation faces. The emphasis is squarely placed on correct diagnosis, correct application, and controlling and monitoring progress. I admit that I saw myself in this stereotyped scenario as an HRD manager, namely as an internal consultant (Scott & Barnes, 2011) to top management. I was the expert, I had the tools and the techniques, but I also failed to bring about sustainable change through a variety of interventions. The literature indicates that 70% of change programmes do not deliver on expectations (Balogun & Hope Haily, 2004; Sackman, Eggenhofer-Rehart & Friesl, 2009). While this figure is contested (Hughes, 2011) in terms of its

reliability, it does resonate with practitioners at the coalface who see little transformation after change initiatives have been implemented within their organisations, either by themselves, as in my case, or by outside consultants. De Klerk (2012) suggests that up to 90% of such interventions are failures. On the basis of this learning, I opted to use a participative action learning set, to help me engage in organisational development, on the one hand, and to co-generate data that can be analysed as part of my methodology in developing a living theory, on the other hand. What I am currently observing is a change in the way the action learning set members are handling their responses to the toxicity in the college, and how they are influencing others. Hence, for the first time I am seeing sustainable small incremental amounts of change happening within the college. I will discuss the learning of these colleagues and their change of practice in the following chapter.

My final learning is an extension of my previous learning, namely that traditional OD practices do not work in a toxic, emotionally volatile environment. On reflection, team-building exercises may be appropriate when change is required due to expansion of departments, introduction of new IT management systems, a change of role players within an organisation, or a need to improve interdepartmental relationships due to changes in workflow. Likewise, wellness programmes, such as sports events, may be appropriate for integration of employees across campuses, or to meet the needs of employees to socialise and to maintain work-life balance. However, they do not address feelings of hurt and the effect that these negative emotions have on productivity and the health and wellness of employees. These interventions do not change the culture of bullying and abuse, nor do they lead to caring and growth. The reason for this is that these programmes do not have an effect on life-enhancing values, such as inclusiveness, participation, empowerment, and caring, which underpin ethical leadership and followership (Finlayson & Harvey, 2016; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe & Carsten, 2013) within a democratic framework of governance. When working with participants, as I have, by improving life-enhancing values, changing the language of communication, and encouraging participants to engage in the study, they come to realise that they can change, and that they can take responsibility for change within their own practice, and this has a domino effect of helping others and the organisation to change.

What I have learnt from the principles of chaos theory and complexity theory is that organisations are networks of ever-expanding relationships between people, tasks, and processes. The relationships between people are the focus of my attention, and people do not exist in isolation within systems of functionality. While closed systems located to tasks and processes may localise employees into units, departments, and campuses, chaos theory helps me to understand the politics and the culture of an organisation, which are continually changing,

and which are not necessarily located to any one unit or department. Previously I could observe patterns of relationships developing between employees, but I could not explain the dynamics of how these relationships formed, disappeared, re-emerged, gained power, lost power, and impacted positively or negatively on the organisation. What appeared as chaos has a structure, a pattern embedded within its apparent randomness, and it is futile to attempt change if one is not aware of these relationships as self-organising, emergent, interconnected thought patterns of employees that manifest as social entities or groupings within the workplace, linked to the initial condition that triggered the response. In other words, what may appear to be random, chaotic behaviour, while being non-predictable, is rational and deterministic.

To explain the relevance of chaos theory and complexity theory to toxicity in the college, I offer the following explanation. When I took a stand on the lack of lived-out values, two groups of people emerged, namely those for and those against my attempt to foreground the role of values in an organisation. The initial feeling was one of confrontation and a threat to the status quo, namely the culture of the organisation as practised in the corporate centre. Initially, one or more employees did not like what I was doing or saying. Within a short space of time, a group of antagonists spontaneously emerged, without being formed into such a group by anyone. I observed that they were gravitating towards each other in terms of where they sat in meetings in the boardroom. The group self-organised and emerged as like-minded individuals growing in momentum and drawing energy from their interaction and conversations within the system. In a similar way, a protagonist group spontaneously emerged, backing the initiative to challenge the status quo and to bring about change. I did not introduce these individuals to each other, but I observed how they became lobby groups around the coffee table at break time, and how they included me in their conversations about the need for change. The more the conversation grew, the more energised and determined the individuals became to challenge the current climate in the college.

Neither of these two groups was predictable in terms of their behaviour. The initial conditions were exactly the same, but the outcomes in the two groups were different. The moment I no longer dealt with values at the morning meetings, the antagonist group changed behaviour and did not ostracise me. It lost energy, its conversations changed, its energy dissipated, it lost impetus and cohesion, it fizzled out, and its members reverted to being friendly colleagues in the workplace. If I now apply to this scenario the video clip 5.4 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPbExSYcQgY>) below of Professor Budd (2009), which I used to explain chaos theory to my action learning set, I am able to see how the double pendulum swings in different directions, loses momentum, and re-emerges, swinging in a different direction. The seemingly random, unpredictable behaviour of the double pendulum can

be accounted for by complex laws of physics, or mechanics, according Professor Budd and offers an explanation of how the seemingly random, unpredictable behaviour of the two groups be accounted for, or explained.



**Video clip 5.4 Professor Budd explaining chaos theory accessed from Youtube.**  
**(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPbExSYcQgY>)**

Traditional OD change practices do not see these networks of thoughts and relationships in a non-linear environment consisting of interrelated and expanding networks of human relationships. Dialogic OD theory, which I explained in chapter 3, is built on complexity science, and it offers a way to address these relationships, by way of conversations. Dialogical OD introduces not the idea of dialogue, as some may assume based on its name, but rather the idea of changing language, through conversations and narratives (Bushe & Marshack, 2015; Cantore & Hick, 2012). Dialogic OD assumes that dialogue is present in the workplace by way of communication processes, namely the conveying of messages to and fro, but that the content of these messages must change.

My claim to knowledge, namely that I have understood OD from a complexity theory and a chaos theory perspective, and have further applied my learning from dialogical OD to change the culture of the college, is evidenced by a new practice that was introduced in the corporate centre. We had never had corporate staff meetings before, as the campuses were required to do. The first corporate centre staff meeting was held not because top management decided to have such a meeting, but by demand from the employees who had been part of my action

learning set, as well as those that had attended the two Critical Caring Conversation Café meetings that I had held. The employees were asked to submit for the agenda whatever items they wanted to be discussed, and this was an open invitation, something that had not happened before since the merger of the college in 2002.

This shows a change in the power dynamics in the college. The balance of power has now shifted, as top management no longer have a monopoly on the conversations that are held about the institution. Should they have chosen to retain the power base, they would have unilaterally set the agenda, and they would have allowed only what they regarded as important and good for the institution to be part of the conversation. They had the power previously to veto what could or could not be spoken about within the institution; now they have allowed a bottom-up approach to have the floor.

The agenda was representative, in that it included matters that had been tabled by not only employers, but employees as well. I was surprised to see the matters tabled and the language used by those that wished for discussions to take place. Figure 5.5 below depicts an extract from the agenda. I would like to draw attention to the fact that the language used is as a result of dialogic organisational development, as the language in item 2.5, relating to a “toxic” work culture, is foreign in the normal conversations in TVET colleges. Hence, conversations in the college are changing due to advocacy campaigns and Open Space Technology (see chapter 4), and they relate directly to the focus of my research, namely toxicity. In addition, staff want improved communication, as is suggested by item 2.7. Hence, I am convinced that my choice of methodologies and my theoretical framework has impacted my learning and has helped me influence the learning of others, as well as improving the practice of myself and other managers.

<p><b>2. MATTERS FOR DISCUSSION</b> <b>2.4 <i>Employee wellness</i></b> <b>2.5 <i>Toxic work culture: how can we fix it?</i></b> <b>2.6 <i>Initiatives to build staff morale</i></b> <b>2.7 <i>More informed staff meetings regularly</i></b></p>
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**Figure 5.5: An extract from the agenda for the first staff meeting of the corporate centre (18 April 2016)**

I have now given an account of why I know what I know, and I have demonstrated that I have improved my practice and I have influenced others to increase their learning and improve their practice as well.

I have devoted a fair proportion of this chapter to discussing my learning from cycle 1, for two reasons. Firstly, I believe that we learn from both our success stories and our failures in life, and maybe even more so from our mistakes, as they have emotional content. Secondly, I covered much theory there, so that I did not have to repeat it when I discuss the other two cycles.

Another learning curve for me, from the second cycle, is the importance of maintaining engagement of the members throughout the project. It is not only the holding together of the group for logistical purposes that is important; sustaining the interaction and support that group members give each other in toxic environments is also crucial. This became evident to me after our year-end breakfast, when participants reflected on the benefits of being part of the action learning set. The members of such a group collaborate in a number of ways. Firstly, they collaborate around an identified problem, interacting dialogically to find a solution. As such, they bring with them an array of perspectives and approaches in resolving the problem. In addition, they collaborate around the action as practitioners. Discussion of the skills and best practices needed for implementing the plans, as well as reflection and re-planning, is necessary, and it brings group members together as partners in a democratic environment, collaboratively attempting to find a solution.

However, in my understanding of an action learning set, the major component is the learning that takes place. Action learning generates learning through human interaction arising from engagement (Raelin, 2006) in attempting to resolve sometimes wicked problems (Brown, Harris & Russell, 2010; Conklin, 2006). By “wicked problems”, I mean problems that defy definition, that have no clear solution, where variables are constantly changing, and are thus unstable, problems that require behaviour changes, and that may result in undesirable consequences when addressed. In some respects, toxicity within organisations fits this description. I learnt from not having regular meetings, due to personal health problems, having to attend a conference, and the college vacation, and due to not keeping communication flowing, that I had to re-establish trust and collaboration by rebuilding rapport. Due to the period of three months being away from each other, memories had to be refreshed, and time was thus wasted. Fortunately, I was able to restore the confidence and cohesion of the team, so that the learning that had been achieved was not lost.

Yet another aspect of my learning relates to the drawing exercises and the impact they had on the healing of the action learning set members. What I observed during the action learning set meetings and the drawing activities was the role that humour plays in communication, and more importantly in relieving emotional stress. Time and again, humour became a coping mechanism, an outlet for expression of emotions, and a way of enhancing bonding amongst the participants

(Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). I recorded the role of humour in my journal as follows: *“I have come to notice and appreciate the importance of humour in binding people together – the act of laughing relieves tension and unifies us around a common accepted matter”* (RPJ 40 (12/2/15).

Wilkins (2014:287) is correct when she states that “[l]aughter itself is incompatible with anger and negative affective states. The physical act of laughter results in physiological changes that stimulate feelings of mirth and cognitive release from anxiety and tension”. Victor Frankl relates how during his imprisonment with fellow prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp, they used jokes as a way of coping (Frankl, 1984). When I reflect on my learning here, I can relate it back to the theoretical stance that I took on wellness and health in Figure 3.1, where I adapted Kirsten, Van der Walt and Viljoen’s (2009) holistic ecosystemic view of the health, well-being, and wellness of the human being, which holds that the person is a bio-psycho-spiritual entity. Laughter has positive effects not only on the emotional state and the psychological domain of the person, but also on their physiological health, as it enhances physiological aspects such as muscle tone and cardiovascular functioning (Lebowitz, Suh, Diaz & Emery, 2011). The endocrine system is also brought into play, with the release of brain chemicals (Olpin & Hesson, 2013). Hence, as I stated previously, I have adopted an inclusive, more holistic approach that encompasses the whole person as a physical, mental, social, psychological, and environmental living human being, with the potential of enjoying well-being through their perceptions and choices, of which laughter is a spontaneous choice. I have learnt that laughter triggers a coping response to toxicity in the workplace. If I go back to the Video clip 5.3 taken during the drawing of the first Collage and I place the cursor at 00:26 seconds, I am able to get the feel of the tension being broken by the spontaneous laughter, when contrasted with the footage that precedes that moment, where there is a deathly silence as members recall and draw emotional experiences from their work environment.

A further learning curve for me was how drawing could be a cathartic healing experience for my action learning set members. I was always aware of the therapeutic nature of art, hence the emphasis on the nature of art therapy (Edwards, 2014) in a clinical setting. However, through the collage drawing, depicting negative, emotionally traumatic experiences, the participants testified to the healing derived from the drawing and their narratives and explanations about their drawings. Two of my action learning set members shared this experience with the group, after explaining their drawings, in the following words:

*What I learnt about the whole process about myself is that it was a good psychological exercise to actually speak about your emotions, getting it out, hearing it, sharing it with*

*people. It was like a session at a psychologist, where it is like a type of a healing process to try and deal with matters that you would rather if you hadn't. (E: PRJ: 27/8/14).*

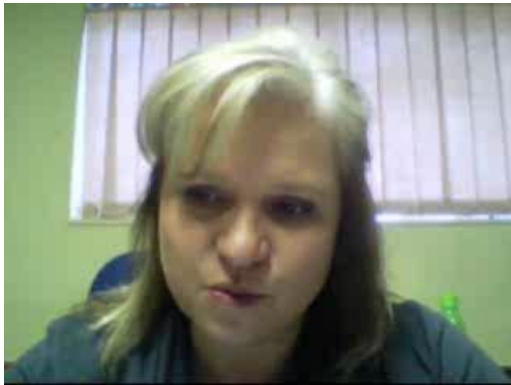
*Um, I'm happy. I just think that this part of talking about it is very important, and I think we must take it back, you know, to... I think there is a lot of this type of... to clean the system, to get ahead at campus level, as well as with other cliques. I know this might be a repeat, but that might be a strategy. (G: GVR: 24/5/2014).*

What I learnt from this exercise and the reflections of the group members was the dual benefit of using drawings in action research. Not only is this a sound and accepted research approach as a participative way of generating data for analysis, but, in addition, it starts a healing process for members who have been emotionally hurt by workplace toxicity. The drawing process, when done in a safe space, creates a favourable environment for emotions to be expressed that were previously suppressed, as is suggested by the following words of the two members quoted above: "getting it out", and "to clean the system".

Although I had supported Meyer's (2011) research, as her HRD manager, into the nature and impact of psychological violence on staff in the college, I had not realised at an emotional level what this really meant for employees. I had a cognitive understanding of the problem, having read the findings of her mixed-methods study, but I had not been aware of the impact of psychological violence on managers that reported to the corporate centre, and the extent to which they had experienced trauma. This was a new learning for me as an inside researcher, and as an HRD manager. The extent is seen in the summary of the first collage (see Table 5.2), where all the members had drawings, and sometimes more than one drawing, which depicted occasions where they had felt emotional trauma due to life-enhancing values being violated.

What speaks to me more at an emotional level is when I compare the footage of one of my action learning set members below (Video Clip 5.5 and Video clip 5.6). In her discussion in her video journal shortly after the first collage was drawn, she portrays through her voice and her body language, particularly her facial expressions, her negative emotions of hurt, and in her discussion of her drawing of hope portrayed in the second collage, her normal personality is evident, namely happy, friendly, and jovial. This video (Video clip 5.5) reflection was recorded by her after the students on her campus went on strike. She had to deal with the emotional trauma, hers and that of her employees, and she had to manage the abuse, disrespect, and bullying of the protesting students, and yet she was not the cause of the strike. Strikes are highly emotive and volatile, they evoke emotions, and adrenaline increases as the body becomes more alert due to fear and the self-preservation instinct. I have included visuals

showing the police presence that was summoned to ensure that the students did not get out of control (Annexure K). Often a police presence only aggravates the situation, as students are fed up with authority figures. After experiencing strikes that took students out of class, as a campus manager she has to account for poor results that are not of her doing, and she reflects on this. The second video (Video clip 5.6) captures her as I know her to be, namely lively, talkative, and full of fun. When the two video recordings are compared with each other, they highlight the emotional pain and hurt of working in a toxic organisation. I am not so much interested in the volume of her voice or the content but the freedom, lightness of her communication. The empathy that I feel for her cannot be recorded in writing in the same way that it is captured in a video recording. The resonance that her experience has for me is highlighted not in writing, but through sight and sound. I include both a written account and videos as evidence of the importance of videos in research; without videos, the real empathy and emotions that are experienced are lost in mere writing.



**Video clip 5.5: Negative emotions arising from unfair demands (Ctrl + Click here)**



**Video Clip 5.6: Emotions under normal conditions (Ctrl + Click here)**

I submit that the intensity of the emotional toxicity is shown in the juxtaposition of these two video clips above (5.5 and 5.6), but that there is still a need to identify the extent of the toxicity. If we turn to the summary document dealing with the content of the narratives and drawings in the first collage (Table 5.2), the average number of drawings is 5.5 per participant. Hence, all the members had more than one bad emotional experience, and while these drawings reflect the major events it is the on-going harassment, lack of support, continually being confronted by adversaries, being made to feel false guilt, and not being given an opportunity to defend oneself that tires managers and drains them of their energy, as one manager put it:

*You never got a chance to defend yourself. My feeling is still when I got into the corporate centre, I'm guilty as charged. When a student brought a story "You are guilty", students were believed without listening to your side of the story. You couldn't defend*

*yourself. You couldn't trust anybody, because you never know when is that trust going to be broken. (C/C 1/14<sup>18</sup>)*

Drawing attention to the power of the unions, and toxic systems manifested in the formation of a transformation task team<sup>19</sup> to deal with equity issues, the same member indicates how the transformation task team divided staff, rather than brought harmony between employees, and how she felt with regard to gender and race: *"You were guilty per association in that stage. I was a woman, and I was white. So that's how I experienced the task team, as them against me"* (C/C 1/14).

A black manager in my action learning set speaks of the toxic power relationships, where campus managers were treated with contempt and were allowed very little input. The language that is used is reminiscent of the apartheid era, which is significant, as it is strong, emotive language, but it is directed at the toxicity displayed by a black leader, when the black manager says, reflecting on his drawing in the first collage:

*The circumstances [...] was there. Sit there and watch. He was also a campus manager. You couldn't even have your say. Yours was just to say "Yes. Ja, baas. Ja, baas. Ja, baas. Nee, ek hoor wat sê baas. Dankie, meneer. Altyd. [Afrikaans: translated as 'Yes, boss. Yes, boss. Yes, boss. No, I hear what boss is saying. Thank you, sir. Always.']"* That was that. (G/C 1/14).

Another manager expressed similar feelings of being undermined, not knowing who to trust, and being dehumanised in this way, when he recalls:

*There was a huge amount of anger. He screamed and he shouted, and I felt like a little mouse sitting in front of him. He was probably 15 years, 20 years younger than I was, but that is how it impacted upon me. I remember quite clearly pushing back, and, like, dissociation took place, as I started to think, "But how in the world have I been let down by the principal, who's divulged this information, when we had promised to keep it confidential? And how can I be treated in this particular way?" My violation of my rights*

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<sup>18</sup> In the code C/C 1/14 C stands for the participant and /C 1 stands for Collage 1 followed by month and year.

<sup>19</sup> A transformation task team had been established by the principal, with the blessing of the provincial Further Education Directorate, to bring about transformation and deal with racism in the college. The transformation task team was made up of senior management, provincial representation, and members of two predominantly black unions, and the other predominantly white unions were left out. Thus, the transformation task team brought fear and division, and it was therefore later abandoned. It features in the first collage drawings.

*as a human being to dignity, of having respect and trust for an agreement that was reached, was totally violated. (K/C 1/14).*

Outbursts of rage, such as that related in the above narrative, were not uncommon, and employees working in this manager's department were used to this form of abuse. From the above comments by the action learning set members, it is evident that exposure to toxicity was an ongoing experience for all the managers, not just some managers at random. In summary, I learnt from my head (cognitive reasoning) and from my heart (empathic understanding), through what was shared by my colleagues in the action learning set, that emotional trauma was prevalent in the college. The intensity and the extent of the toxicity in the organisational culture of the college was the result of toxic leaders, toxic followers, and toxic structures, which included some union members. My learning from this was the entrenched nature of the toxicity that we as managers experienced in the workplace. This toxicity, experienced as fear and a struggle for survival by the majority of employees, is expressed by one of my members, when she commented:

*Really, to be working, coming to work with the emotional stress is really disturbing, and as I've said earlier to C, it's survival of the fittest. Everyone is looking. Elkeen vir homself. [Afrikaans: translated as "Each one for himself."] Everyone is looking for your position. J talked about the union, so you look into the types of unions that we are having, checking whether you should belong to this one or that one, who will protect you. That's... that's how things are here. (I/C 1/14).*

In the third cycle I had the opportunity to participate in some very practical exercises with my participants, such as utilising the nominal group technique (NGT) to establish which values we saw as critical for influencing the conversations in the college, so as to bring about organisational development and healing. From this exercise, we were able to find a point of leverage into the toxic system, as we agreed that, in one way or another, at the heart of the emotional trauma was the lack of communication. On the basis of this, we developed a working model that spoke to the lack of values that contributed to or underlay the problem of communication within the organisation. I will deal with this model as part of the inputs of my action learning set, in chapter 7.

In addition, all the participants agreed that we should undertake a personal and corporate centre SWOT analysis to ensure two things: firstly, that the values we identified were in line with our assessment of the college's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and, secondly, that we had the skills and attitudes that were needed to implement change within

such an organisation. Two interventions for addressing the problem of poor communication that led to toxicity were identified for planned change. The first intervention was an advocacy campaign using posters (Annexure L) to highlight values as a way of addressing toxicity and the problem of lack of communication problem. The second intervention was the creation of a safe space for discussing toxicity and values through Open Space Technology, and thus the establishment of a Critical Caring Conversation Café, which hosted two meetings for all employees at the corporate centre (see Annexure M).

## **5.6 The impact of my learning**

The impact of my learning on my research and practice as an HRD manager centres around relationships. The first relationship is with the members of my action learning set, and then the second relationship is my relationship with all the other employees at the corporate centre. It is very easy to slip into the blame game when dealing with toxic leaders, toxic followers, and toxic environments. However, what I have noticed is that I have developed a caring attitude towards all employees, starting with my action learning set members, extending to all those that I rub shoulders with every day.

In caring conversations with others I have found myself showing greater interest in their well-being, their families, their careers, and their interests. Dutton, Workman and Hardin (2014, 277) express this well, when they state that “compassion is an interpersonal process involving the noticing, feeling, sense making and activity that alleviates the suffering of another person”. That does not mean that I am the most liked person in the corporate centre, but it does mean that I have become mindful of others and their hurt, and, secondly, that my action learning set members now communicate with me more frequently, either via mobile phone (text messages) or WhatsApp messages, and, thirdly, that other employees have sought my advice on personal and work-related matters. The relationships are stronger, and there is greater depth and maturity in the conversations, which are characterised by sharing of personal problems related to management of divisions or relationships with senior management.

Caring, when expressed in a genuine way, is noticed by bystanders, or witnesses (Dutton *et al.*, 2014), and it contributes to a more positive work culture, as it makes people aware that victims are not alone, that they have support. I have motivated, supported, and influenced others in the action learning set to register for further studies and to pursue research, as I care for their advancement within the college, and their personal development. One member, whom I meet with half an hour before the start of work every day for mutual encouragement and motivation, is busy with a doctorate; three other members have registered for a master’s degree in administration. I am committed to helping them succeed in their studies. My caring in the

college is demonstrated in my support of two employees who are suffering from cancer. I have counselled them, shared my own personal experiences of chemotherapy, given them each a hypnotherapy CD on visualisation techniques, and encouraged them frequently to persevere. My caring extends to my critical friends working in the PALAR project under the supervision of my promoter at North-West University. We meet once a month; some of my critical friends are based at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth. We Skype and attend workshops and conferences together, so I have built up healthy relationships with them, and I accept their advice and criticism of my work as we share reflections together on our progress as researchers.

Learning to care more about colleagues did not happen at the end of my study, but gradually grew in importance for me. I had always cared for people, as part of my ontology, but I became more aware of the hurt in the workplace, and my empathy grew to the point that I engaged with the literature in order to gain a better understanding of how caring can impact an organisation. I shared with the organisation what I had discovered about caring, as I gave each participant a copy of *Leadership: the care and growth model* (Schuitema, 2011) as a present. My learning with regard to caring is consistent with my use of the wellness theory that I chose in chapter 3. Caring is a spiritual dimension that is found in all religions. Therefore, my choice of using an adapted version of the holistic ecosystemic view of the health, well-being, and wellness of the human being is justified, as this view incorporates the spiritual dimension.

A further impact of my learning is that the rigour associated with doing research has sharpened my analytical skills, and I have become more critical in my assessment of what I do as an HRD manager. I have solidified my learning by paying attention to what I call the three Ps that must be taken into consideration in organisational development:

- Power* – on the negative side, the abuse of power by toxic leaders and toxic followers, and on the positive side, the empowerment of healing and development, particularly of marginalised, suffering, hurting, and bullied employees who do not have a voice;
- People* – who are the core of any organisation, with their strengths and weaknesses, having the potential to grow, and to even surprise themselves by what they can achieve if the environment is conducive for wellness and thriving to take place;
- Processes* – The end results and outcomes are determined not by the plans and goals alone, but by the processes involved in the network of interpersonal relationships that exist within a fluid organisation, which is constantly changing, in what may be seen as chaos.

I find that I am applying Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur & Savage, 1970) when I read anything that comes in written form, be it from employees or from management. Hermeneutics as a science and art that attempts to honour both a willingness to listen and a willingness to suspect, and it can work from a critical paradigm (Kinsella, 2006). The hermeneutics of suspicion allow the text to be read against the grain (Bartholomae, Petrosky & Waite, 2014). By this I mean that reading a text as it stands, at face value, is reading with the grain – the text is accepted for what it is, without critique, it is accepted as genuine with no alternative meanings, with normal acceptable meanings, from a non-critical position. Reading against the grain is reading between the lines, going against the grain, seeking other meanings contrary to what the surface structure is saying, which are hidden or disguised within the text. Reading with the grain is looking for the obvious meaning, while reading against the grain is looking for the subversive, alternative meaning lying below the surface. I have asked myself whether I have resorted to this form of hermeneutics because there is little or no trust in the college, or whether it is because I am now more aware than before of the people, the politics, and the power plays between toxic leaders, toxic followers, and a toxic environment, including the structures that may be tainted because of members being toxic, and hence I am on my guard against any toxicity. I am more aware of processes at play that either enhance communication or suppress the voice of the voiceless. I believe it has come from my learning from my participants the extent and the source of their emotional trauma, which is characterised by poor communication or non-communication, which at times has been deliberate. The communication problem has been exacerbated by life-enhancing values, such as trust, participation, inclusion, and empowerment, not being fully lived out in the college.

### ***5.6.1 My personal coping strategies***

I draw this chapter to a close by highlighting the coping strategies that I use in order to survive as an HRD manager in such a toxic environment. Over the past two years I have been HRD manager, new business manager, acting new business manager, back to HRD manager, and now back to HR manager, responsible for all HR functions (HRM and HRD). This shuffling of posts and positions indicates the indecisiveness of management to stick to a position and not be swayed by unions, which often lobby for their members to have certain positions within the organisation. It seems that my position now is that I do the work of two jobs, as the college's wage bill can only accommodate one HR position. With uncertainty about my position comes a host of negative emotions. How then have I coped using the learning that I have gained from my research?

Firstly, I have drawn on my personal resources of being able to practice visualisation (Margolin, Pierce & Wiley, 2011). My creative side as an artist allows me to visualise very easily. The creativity in the drawing of the two collages helped me and my colleagues to deal with emotional trauma, as I have already explained the therapeutic nature associated with the act of drawing. Whether I draw using a medium or whether I imagine it has the same therapeutic effect. I have coped by visualising not the negative occurrences, events, and experiences within the college, but the hope of where the college can go, how I can play a decisive positive role in influencing my own learning and practice as an HRD manager (now HR manager), and how I can influence my employees to improve their learning and practice.

Due to my learning around becoming aware of the needs of others, to care more deeply I have become more mindful of the importance of mindfulness (Williams & Penman, 2011). Living in the moment, being aware of my own physical body and its presence in space and time, its reaction at a physiological level to external stress triggers and negative internal dialogue, has equipped me to have greater understanding of negative situations, and to take the necessary precautions, so as not to be sucked into self-pity or depression. I am thus able to cope by being there mentally before things happen physically. I had given a CD that was an insert to a book on mindfulness that I found useful (Williams & Penman, 2011) to all my participants at the start-up meeting of the action learning set, as part of my strategy to ensure that I looked after myself and my participants, as an ethical requirement of sound research protocols.

A further technique that helped me to cope during my research was the number of reflections that I was doing. Writing about emotional events is also therapeutic (Hussain, 2010; Pennebaker, 1997). I wrote twice a month in my own personal journal, and then on a monthly basis I had to submit reflections on my study to my supervisor, as part of the PALAR group working under a grant from the National Research Foundation. The writing activity, reflecting on what my action learning set and I were experiencing, how we were supportive of each other, and the strategy that we had devised to enhance values in the light of the toxicity, helped me to deal with the emotional trauma that we had experienced. Often the reflections were about hope and the positive things that were happening, so that there was balance in my perception of the lived-out reality. Putting the emotions into words enabled me to distance myself from the events. It allowed for other thoughts to emerge, and the opportunity to reframe some of the experiences, and the interpretation thereof. This had a therapeutic effect, as the intensity of the emotion was mitigated by language and the writing activity.

Finally, my research partners were included in my coping strategy. From my failed attempt to bring about change in January/February 2013, which I described earlier in this chapter, I learnt

that I could not run on my own. I needed partners, be it for data generation and analysis, for driving change as change agents, or as colleagues for moral, emotional or psychological support. I needed strong, solid, trustworthy relationships with people who were reliable. In my action learning set I found such colleagues. In addition, in my critical friends who were busy with their studies at the university, I found researchers who were prepared to listen, offer critique on my work, and interact with me on an intellectual basis around research matters. I have to travel a total of 100 kilometres to the Friday afternoon meetings once a month, and never do I regret it. These meetings are like a breath of fresh air. I come away energised and motivated. This is in sharp contrast to my work environment, where I am emotionally and physically drained by Friday by the negativity of some of the employees, which is energy-sapping. I learnt that there is energy in positive relationships that I harness as a coping mechanism to deal with toxicity, as I am a toxic handler (Frost, 2003:13), who acts as a buffer that handles the emotional toxicity within the workplace, and is susceptible to experiencing burnout unless there is a support mechanism in place. My support mechanism that performs this function is my action learning set members and my critical friends.

## **5.7 Summary**

I have highlighted and given evidence in this chapter of my learning from an epistemological and praxis perspective as I changed my mind and practice from engaging in diagnostic to dialogic organisational development covered in all 3 cycles. I also covered here my learning related to establishing the action learning set, building and fostering relationships within the set in order to cogenerate data for analysis and to witness the therapeutic effects of using visual methods when dealing with emotional content. In the following chapter I highlight and offer evidence of the learning and improved practice of my action learning set members that I gained during this study, by drawing from cycle 2 and cycle 3. The learning is framed by paying attention to their own personal learning, in other words what they learnt about themselves and their practice as managers, what they learnt about their colleagues, and what they learnt about the organisation, from within the theoretical framework of action research, the toxic triangle model, chaos theory, and dialogic organisational development.

## CHAPTER 6

# A CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF THE LEARNING OF THE ACTION LEARNING SET MEMBERS

### 6.1 Introduction

My argumentation throughout this study is that the use of dialogic organisational development approaches embedded in a climate of life-enhancing values positively contributes to a reduction in organisational toxicity, thus helping to improve employees' perception of wellness. In this chapter, I present evidence of the learning gained, and the subsequent change in practice, as reported by the members of the action learning set. Being able to improve their own wellness allowed them to take action as managers, to try and enhance the wellness of those within their sphere of influence.

I created the relational space for the above learning to occur, and I facilitated dialogical OD interventions (Bushe & Marshak, 2015) and the promotion of life-enhancing values. In doing this, I was linking practice to my theories, as discussed in chapter 3. By "relational space", I mean a space where learning, trust, collaboration, participation, inclusiveness, and innovation are valued, encouraged, and nurtured, so that interpersonal relationships and energy flows of love and acceptance are felt and manifested between all employees, contributing to their own wellness, and that of the organisation. I will not take the same approach as I did in chapter 5, where I traced the events within cycle 2 and cycle 3 that indirectly relate to the participants' learning through my understanding of my own practice.

I now generalise the learning gained across cycles 2 and 3 and pay more attention to the significance of what the managers in the action learning set learnt about themselves, as well as the college as an organisation, and how they began to apply this learning within their own contexts. The learning is aligned with the anthropological ecosystemic model of health, wellness, and well-being (Kirsten, Van der Walt & Viljoen, 2009), the dialogic OD approach (Bushe & Marshak, 2014a), the values-driven approach (Barrett, 2014), the toxic triangle model (Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser, 2007), and the complexity theory (Grobman, 2005; Condorelli, 2016) and chaos theory (Levy, 2007), as discussed fully in chapter 3, which sets out the theoretical framework for the study.

This chapter addresses the following questions:

- What personal learning did the action learning set members gain about themselves and their practice?

- What coping strategies assisted them to enhance their own wellness, in spite of toxicity being present?
- What did they learn about some of the research processes and theories?
- How did they influence others to improve their wellness in a toxic workplace?

If there is evidence to support these questions, then the action learning set members have learnt to improve their own wellness, and how to contribute to improving wellness in the workplace. As this is true, I believe I have contributed to answering my research question, namely “How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current toxicity which is experienced every day?”

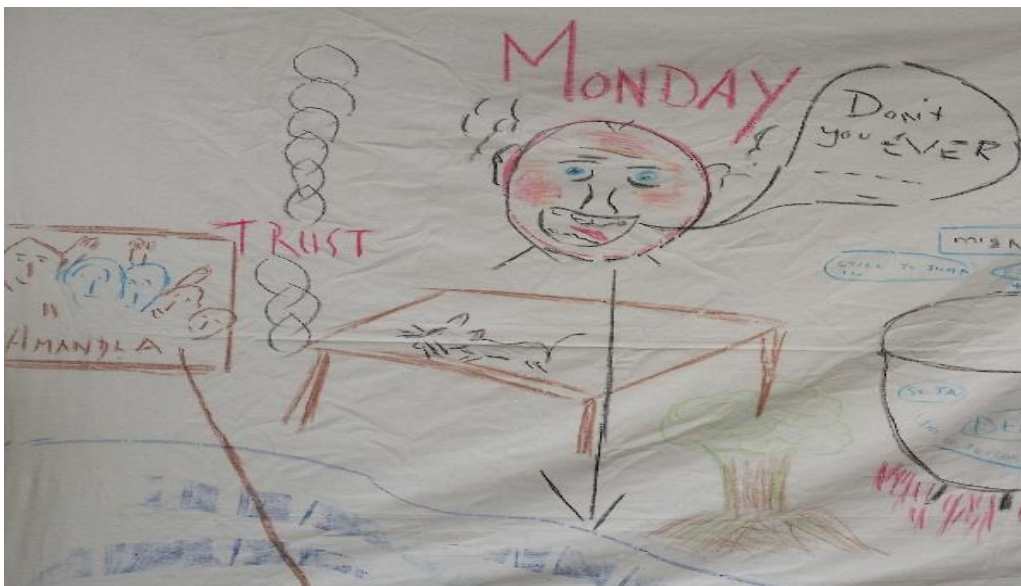
The action learning set members’ engagement in the activities of the set, either by way of being present, fully participating in discussions in the meetings, doing reflection, participating in activities, or implementing coping or change strategies, contributed significantly to their own learning, and to the learning of the set. This type of learning is done in the workplace and on the job, in action, where individuals take responsibility for their own learning, while being agents of change (Zinskie & Rea, 2016). The process of learning in action brings meaning to the concept of praxis, as theory and practice unfold within the context of working as an employee. When the action learning is done with others, it encompasses collaborative and participatory action learning (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015).

This form of learning in practice has its roots in Hegelian dialectical philosophy (thesis-antithesis-synthesis), and the learning has no limits, as it continually opens up new contexts and relationships, and thereby offers new opportunities for learning to take place, and to improve practice on an on-going basis. I take my understanding and use of praxis from the Frankfurt School, and from Paulo Freire and Antonio Gramsci. Freire saw in praxis a way in which people could become critically aware of their oppression, the structures that were responsible for the oppression, and their need for liberation (Freire, 1986), while Gramsci saw praxis as a mode of reasoning that is a result of practical human action concretised in history (Gramsci, 1971). It is the practical working of humans within a historical context that gives meaning and understanding to their actions. Action-oriented research, with its emphasis on action learning, offers what Coughlan and Coughlan (2015:198) refer to as “the development of practical knowledge that is actionable by practitioners and theoretically robust for researchers”. What the action learning set members learnt must be read and understood against this background, which is steeped in the ideas of Reginald Revans’s (1982) action learning, Donald Schön’s (1984) reflection in action, and David Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning. So, in addressing the

individual members' learning in action related to the toxicity that they experienced, I have divided the chapter into two main themes, namely (i) what the members learnt about themselves, and (ii) what they learnt in order to improve their practice as managers in a toxic environment.

## 6.2 Learning about oneself in relation to toxicity

From the inputs of the action learning set members, it can be understood that while they were experiencing emotional trauma, they never actually named it. The word "toxicity" was not part of the language used in the organisation's conversations. The action learning set members knew that they felt abused, used, and bullied, and that it was not pleasant. Further, the toxicity was negatively affecting their health, but they continued to suppress their emotions and mask their true feelings of hurt. It was during the process of the study in the second cycle that they expressed the emotional trauma that was linked to an event or events that spanned five years starting in 2009. Through the action learning set members' participation in drawing a collage, emotions surfaced that had previously been suppressed. It was during this drawing exercise that the members had an opportunity to confront their feelings, and they learnt about toxicity, what it is, how it was affecting them, and how they were handling it. Figure 6.1 below contains some visual content of their drawings.



**Figure 6.1: Collage 1: Negative emotional experiences**

The part of the collage shown in Figure 6.1 draws attention to the plight of managers who are victims of a toxic organisation. In the top left corner, a traumatic experience is captured where a toxic manager made the employee feel like a mouse. Another drawing on the far right depicts mouths and ears with an X covering them (Annexure I), which indicates that members were not

allowed to speak or give their views, and if they did, they were not listened to. A number of important aspects related to members' learning are captured in the paragraphs that follow.

### **6.3 Learning about trauma and stress: their effect, and how the action learning set members coped**

During cycle 2, after having explained to the members of the action learning set the theories that made up my framework for the study, the members had a good understanding of Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser's (2007) toxic triangle model, and they better understood their emotional trauma against this theoretical model, while participating in data generation through drawing collage 1 (Figure 6.1 above). In cycle 3, while the members were grooming horses (Figure 6.2), they were interviewed and asked semi-structured open-ended questions, one of which focused on what they had learnt about themselves during the study (see Annexure N). This grooming process was utilised to engage the conscious mind on the grooming, so that the unconscious mind was not inhibited, and to allow members to speak about emotional events that may have been traumatic. I have used an abbreviation for the name of each person by using the code assigned to the member for the sake of anonymity, followed by the letters "EA", which stand for "equine activity".

When discussing the merits of using the grooming approach, two members responded positively in this way:

*In my experience, I think it made it easier, because you've got something to keep your one hand busy, and you know you're busy with an animal here. The animal is at ease, so I think that had a calming effect on me. So, you know, I didn't feel frightened whatsoever. (EEA2016<sup>20</sup>)*

*I think the value in it is that your mind... that you are not focusing on your problem. It is... you are doing two things. I think I could have stroked maybe a dog as well, and it wouldn't have... but it took just... you are a bit removed from yourself, and you can... and sometimes I think you're a little bit surprised about what you say, because you didn't know you were going to say that, because you're not that prepared. Your attention is at two places at the same time. (CEA2016)*

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<sup>20</sup> In the codeEEA Like in all the other codes the first letter always refers to participant. EA refers to Equine activity which was the semi structure open ended interview followed by the date.



**Figure 6.2: Equine grooming interview**

I am now able to turn my attention to how the managers dealt with their stress and trauma caused by the toxicity, and what they learnt about themselves and the organisation in the process: I am aware that coping mechanisms are influenced by the individual's personality, previous exposure to the same or similar events, culture, and mental health (Kovacs, 2007; Folkman, 2010), and hence not all people have the same reaction to the same event or stressors. As one of the members said, *"I saw something, and how somebody else experienced it could be totally different"* (CC1/14).

While reflecting on the process of drawing collage 1 as part of visual research methods to generate data, the same member of the action learning set indicated the following with regard to understanding herself:

*I learnt that I have suppressed so many bad experiences, and have internalised a lot of stress and trauma. Some of the experiences I have totally forgotten, in an effort to deal with it. I only remembered it again once I saw my colleagues drawing it or referring to it.* (CRJ, March 2014)

Further, she reflected as follows on her emotional response to trauma:

*Once I remembered an event, all the negative feelings and emotions came back. I felt angry again towards some of my colleagues. I was also relieved to feel that we have actually moved on from some of the negative feelings. I also only recognised the emotions and the negative environment once I looked back at it. I could immediately feel the stress and worries again. My stomach was in a knot, and I kept looking around to*

*see if my colleagues noticed it, since I worked so hard to hide it all along.* (CRJ, March 2014)

This member has learnt to engage in **critical self-reflection** on the way in which she handled stress caused by trauma which she had suppressed. Trauma is due to the body having to deal with an excessive release of cortisol, which derails the functioning of the cortex, while stress is the alarm system of the amygdala, which prepares the body through adrenalin release to act appropriately in the face of fear, be it real or imagined fear. Suppressing emotions has physical and psychological effects (D'Andrea, Sharma, Zelechowski & Spinazzola, 2011) and may lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is characterised by flashbacks, avoidance, numbing and physiological responses to triggers or reminders of the event, and physiological health problems, such as sleep disorders, elevated heart rate, loss of memory, and skin disorders. More importantly, this member also recognised how merely thinking about a negative event in the past is able to rekindle in the present the emotions associated with that event, triggering an endocrine response. The mind-body connection is not often acknowledged or understood by victims of stress, and thus every time traumatic events are thought about, the body responds accordingly, with negative health consequences. This member's reflection also shows her negative coping mechanism of "hiding" her true emotions from others. She has learnt to listen to her body, as she indicates above that she could feel the stress and worries as she thought about the trauma, and she links that to feeling a knot in her stomach. She is now in a better position to pick up on the effects of negative thoughts, and is *better able to respond, and in this way improve her own wellness.*

Another member of the action learning set, reflecting on the drawing of the first collage (Figure 6.1), expressed himself this way:

*I learnt that I suppress a lot of negative thought. It was difficult for me to think about the events. It took time and opened up old wounds. Maybe I have never worked through them, like seeing colleagues toyi-toyi. I learnt that we all have emotions, and that sometimes it's good to share and laugh about it, but it was painful days. I didn't realise I was so sensitive to having emotions affect my body, as I was diagnosed with ulcers due to stress.* (KRVJ, March 2014)

As with the previous member, there is a realisation that negative emotions have been suppressed, as well as a realisation of the effect that stress has on the body, in that he was diagnosed as having ulcers, although it is debatable whether there is a link between ulcers and stress (Fink, 2011; Levenstein, Rosenstock, Jacobsen & Jorgensen, 2015). There is also a

critical questioning of self as to whether he had coped with negative thoughts by “[not working] through them”.

For another member of the group, the reflection on the process of drawing allowed him to better understand himself and how he had handled emotions and trauma:

*I would say the emotions that I experienced after I have overcome the hurdle, you know, to convince myself to talk about this was like a traumatic experience that one had where, you know... where you cover it up, where you try to forget about it, and as you start the journey from 2008 to 2014, it was like experiencing again certain feelings, and a whole kaleidoscope of emotions came up, like fear, anger, frustration, you know, a sense of hopelessness. [...] What I learnt about this whole process about myself is that it was a good psychological exercise to actually speak about your emotions, getting it out, airing it, sharing it with people. Um, it was like a session at the psychologist, where you... where, you know... where it is like a healing process to try and deal with matters that you would rather just... if you haven't went through this exercise, you would just tried to suppress it, didn't talk about it. So that experience was good. I learnt about myself and others in the group. (ERVJ, March 2014)*

This member, like the previous member, came to realise and acknowledge that the way he had handled stress and trauma was to try and “cover it up”, “forget about it”, “suppress it”. Doing the participatory data-generation exercise enabled him to grips with his suppressed emotions and realise what coping mechanisms he was using to deal with stress and trauma.

The prevalence and intensity of the emotional toxicity within the college cannot be denied, nor can the fact that the way in which the managers were dealing with their emotions and trauma was to suppress it. Only in the visual drawing activities did they come to realise what detrimental effects suppressing their emotions in this way had on their physical and mental health. Hiding one's emotions contributes to personal isolation, and friends, family, and colleagues are not able to offer support. It has also been suggested that suppression of emotions is “an attempt at self-control that drains finite resources that then become depleted” (Rimes, Ashcroft, Bryan & Chalder, 2016:2), resulting in fatigue. The literature supports the fact that there is a human cost to toxicity, which is manifested in psychological symptoms (Keashley, 2010), such as depression, anxiety, and anger, and physiological musculoskeletal symptoms, such as stiffness of muscles, a sore neck, and a tight chest (Vie, Glasø & Einarsen, 2012). Suppression of emotions can, however, have even more serious consequences, such as cancer and cardiovascular disease (Chapman, Fiscella, Kawachi, Duberstein & Muennig, 2012).

The question I can now ask is “How are these managers coping, and what have they learnt that has impacted their behaviour since they have been part of the action learning set?” I believe that the following response answers the question put to the managers, and it demonstrates that they have learnt new coping strategies, such as taking responsibility in the workplace:

*You get mature. You come to a stage where now you feel that where it goes to push, you must take **responsibility**, even if it's not your territory. You take your own... you take that responsibility, because it's not for me, it's not for them, it's for the college. [...] Now you taking that responsibility. You basically taking over and doing your thing, because you got the competency. (GEA, 2016)*

Other managers have also learnt to take responsibility and manage the situation and themselves:

*We don't wait for somebody to intervene, because that was in the past. I was always waiting for somebody to come and **manage** it, and I realised that other people also don't know what to do. So we were actually... I learnt to **manage** myself. (CEA, 2016).*

Others have developed **spiritually**, and they now find in their faith a coping strategy: “*I believe in **prayer**. [...] So I just felt that maybe for all the situations... all the difficult situations I find myself in, I need to say that short little prayer*” (AEA, 2016).

Others have learnt to manage their own emotions and become assertive: “*Firstly, to be assertive. Secondly, to be **calm***” (FEA, 2016).

Another member of the set also expressed that she has learnt to be assertive, and from her response I am able to sense her strong feeling of assertiveness and confidence, which is evident from the language that she uses, when she says that she “[knows] enough”:

*I've learnt to be more assertive, and I have learnt to trust my own instincts, because I **know enough**. I think it's a bit of experience, but previously I knew what to do, but we were not allowed to do so. (CEA, 2016).*

The majority of the members also indicated that they *no longer personalise* issues, acknowledging their limitations, but at the same time maintaining their professional behaviour as managers, by remaining responsible and accountable for what they do. Accepting the limitations of human fallibility, combined with an attitude of not personalising issues and seeing the bigger

picture is a major breakthrough in their own learning and development. The corollary of this is that if you do not know your limits, you take on too much work, and then if you personalise issues when there is non-delivery or something goes wrong, the tendency is to turn inwards, engaging in self-blame and feelings of unwarranted guilt, which negatively affects the self-concept, which, in turn, leads to low self-esteem and depression. The literature includes perceptions that “attributions of self-blame may be one of way of dealing with highly stressful events such as bullying” (Hogh, Mikkelsen & Hansen, 2011:119), which is relevant in the college context. The action learning set members responded in the following ways to the question on how they have coped differently with trauma after having participated in this study:

*And so I think I've learnt... a few things that I've learnt from this process was that I do not take things personally anymore. Because previously that was my main thing. (CEA, 2016).*

*I'm a perfectionist. I take things personally if things doesn't work. And I've totally moved out of that type of thinking. I try to be less perfectionist, and I'm trying to not take things personal, so if things doesn't work, it's because of a bigger picture, bigger organisation that's not functioning, and it's not me. (EAE, 2016).*

*If I have tried my best, if I did things the way they're supposed to be done, if I've followed policies, if I've tried to implement what was supposed to be implemented, and it failed, and I'm not getting any support, then I have to learn to accept that I can only go this far. (AEA, 2016).*

Rather than personalising issues, by seeing themselves as part of the problem, which leads to feelings of unwarranted guilt, the managers are now able to accept their limitations, and not blame themselves for any assumed failures. As accountable managers, who had learnt to become critically reflective of themselves and the organisation, they were now in a position to identify that some of the toxicity was due to *system problems*. In this sense, they were becoming far more critical in their understanding of the workplace: *“I'm realising now that some of the things happening to us are systemic problems. It's the system that's wrong, not me”* (CEA, 2016).

Another action learning set member was able to identify that there is an improvement in the college due to changes in the system, where he is included and feels that he is participating in decisions, where previously he felt side-lined: *“So there's definitely a system change there that's working for me at this stage”* (EAE, 2016).

Apart from understanding the toxicity that was experienced by way of emotional trauma, in finding better ways to deal with workplace toxicity, the managers developed as individuals. Part of this development was that they also became more critical of the systems within the organisation that were toxic. In addition to their personal development, they also learnt from within the action learning set about relationships, and the dynamics of how this type of collaboration can support them against the impact of toxic systems. Their learning about how they coped, for example by drawing on prayer as a spiritual exercise, or by taking responsibility and depersonalising issues as a psychological mechanism, feeds into and supports my choice of using the anthropological ecosystemic model, and it also indicates that I have been working within my theoretical framework.

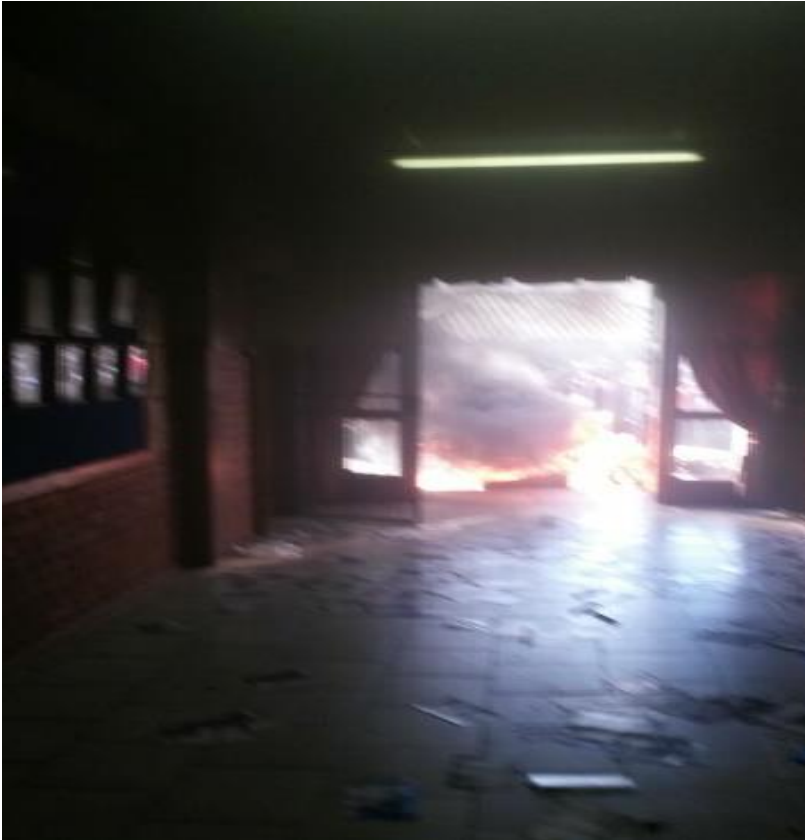
While bringing about organisational change, there has been a reduction in toxicity, but it must be noted that toxicity, caused by either toxic leaders or toxic followers or the toxic system, rears its ugly head periodically. It is never totally eradicated, under the best of conditions, because the human factor remains. Appelbaum and Roy-Girard (2007:18) make a valid observation that “toxicity is a fact of life in all organizations; however, not all organizations are toxic”. Gilbert, Carr-Ruffino, Ivancevich and Konopaske (2012:31) suggest that narcissism “provides the basis for toxicity in an organization”. Bosses or followers who have narcissistic personalities may not leave the organisation, and if they do, they may well be replaced with other employees of the same ilk. It is impossible to eradicate toxicity completely, but when asked if there was a change, one member had this to say indicating that toxicity is still noticeable:

*Just recently students were on strike, because they wanted us to... they wanted us to assist, and I was not informed about the whole thing. [...] It's something that I tried to address. You know, it could have been avoided. I wrote letters to warn management about this programme, but they did nothing. (EIA, 2016).*

The toxicity does not come from the strikes, although that is emotionally traumatic, but from not being informed and not being listened to by management, and this is interpreted as not being cared for or supported, and hence as toxic. If senior management had included the inputs of this manager in their plans, and if they had paid attention to her letters warning management, the strike could have been averted, and she would not have experienced the trauma and stress, but her understanding is that management did not care, and that they left her high and dry. She faced the wrath of students, and unnecessarily so. She was left on her own, as she did what she could, but they “did nothing”. There is a sense of abandonment, a lack of support, which is again highlighted in the following response of hers:

*I wrote them letters. They never responded. I even... after the letter was received, withdrawing their services, I wrote another letter saying, "I've received this letter. People have withdrawn their services. Let us address the situation." But they did nothing. (EIA, 2016.)*

When senior managers do not listen to their managers, when they ignore the warnings that they communicate, and they show an uncaring, uncommunicative attitude, leaving managers high and dry in the face of striking students, it leads to toxicity in the workplace. Two months later, this manager had a similar experience. Her campus, which she endeavours to keep clean and tidy, was again trashed by students. This time students were striking over alleged broken promises made by senior management with the student representative council which students were not privy to. She sent me the photograph depicted in Figure 6.3 in a WhatsApp message. The photograph shows the entrance to her campus trashed, and motor car tyres burning on the steps to the administration building, the smoke from which has dirtied the walls and the curtains inside. The important thing though is that this manager is now coping and taking these experiences in her stride. She has reached this point of resilience through sharing with me and other managers within the action learning set. Her coping under stress has come about from her articulating and talking about her traumatic experiences, and from her realisation that the toxic system is to blame, not her. She no longer attributes failure to herself as a manager. The offices in the building had to be evacuated because of the smoke, and she sent a cell phone message saying *"Thanks to the security company that also helped and kept on checking on me while I was waiting inside the office alone"* (ASMS, 20/08/16).



**Figure 6.3: The results of student strikes on a campus**

A fellow colleague expressed the fact that stress and trauma continue because of management, who are not showing the characteristics of good leadership, when he said the following:

*That thing [trauma] you know, is still there, because, you know... I will give you an example. Our people... our management doesn't want to take responsibility, so it's still there. We still experiencing it, because I think maybe it is caused by lack of communication, so it hasn't gone away, it's still there. As I say, people don't want to take the responsibility, not own responsibility, accountability for the thing that they supposed to do. They always pass the buck. They always pass the buck, and that thing will end up with you, and it will also cause that. It's happening. It's continuous. [...] Ja, it's there on a daily basis, because whenever you go to somebody, the management, "No, this is not my responsibility. No, I must be a [unintelligible], so I can't make decision." You get traumatised. (EEA, 2016).*

When the buck is passed to the levels of lower management because senior management are not fulfilling their leadership role in making decisions, it is a form of bullying (toxic behaviour), because the same managers who are held accountable for outputs have to rely on decisions

from senior management that are not forthcoming. Blame for failure is directed at those who have to deliver but cannot, because decisions that contribute to the success of the project are withheld by the same senior managers who hold them accountable. Although there has been a real reduction in toxicity in the college, which is supported by evidence of positive changes in management, it has not been completely eradicated, and therefore employees have learnt and deploy positive coping strategies, unlike the suppression of emotions, and the avoidance, that characterised their behaviour before.

#### **6.4 Learning to improve practice in a toxic environment**

Despite the existence of toxicity in the college, managers still have to manage and improve their practice, so as to enhance values and improve wellness within such an environment. From the video of strikes, depicted in Video clip 6.1 below, the effect it has on managers' emotions can be understood especially as police are called to maintain law and order..



#### **Video Clip 6.1: Arousal of emotions through student strikes**

When I look at the frame above it does not arouse any emotion, but when I look at the frames in the video clip that follows of the same strike my emotions are aroused. This is due to the association of seeing police with revolvers on their hips and the sound of rhythmical chanting from students. I have mixed emotional feelings of fear, excitement, and anger due to the adrenaline rush. The stress of experiencing these activities has a negative impact upon health and managers have to learn coping skills. Much of what the members of the set learnt about personal and organisational change in cycle 2 and cycle 3 has equipped them, firstly, with personal life-enhancing attributes, such as a positive attitude, a certain mindset, and life-enhancing values that will improve their own well-being. Secondly, they have learnt and exercised useful cognitive abilities, such as critical thinking and critical reflecting. Finally, their

learning has extended to the use of practical processes, such as the nominal group technique (NGT), Open Space Technology, and SWOT analysis, which are transferable to other areas of their work. I now highlight some of these learning experiences.

It is my contention that in writing up these types of chapters in action research, so much effort is spent on reporting what the set did, and how they learnt to do what they did, that little attention is paid to what the members learnt of the research process itself. The research process is important, since, as managers, they will need to utilise research methods and methodologies to find solutions to problems in their own area of management. Hence, I have purposely paid attention to what my colleagues have learnt about aspects of qualitative action research. I believe this to be an important element in their own development. As an HRD manager, I expect that some of my colleagues will aspire to become researchers in their own right, not only for higher-degree purposes, but as an integral part of their professional practice and lifelong learning, which will improve the college's wellness. My envisaged output after their participation in this research project is that they would embrace action learning as a valid and acceptable way of resolving wicked problems through reflection in and on their practice.

*Reflection* is a crucial component of action learning in any action research practice, as it is part of the cyclical process (that is, "plan, act, observe, reflect"). I realised early in this study that anyone starting the process of reflection has to be aware that reflection is not recall, neither are reflections merely reports or recollections of what happened or what was experienced. I had come to this understanding myself when doing reflection on my study for the action learning set, or the participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) group, which was supported by a grant from the National Research Foundation (NRF). My reflection for that group encapsulates this thinking:

*I learnt that some of the main components of reflecting in AR [action research] and on the researcher/practitioner's praxis is not merely to give an account of a, b or c (that is, reporting), but to make it existential and interpretive – how, what one has seen, heard, observed and felt (emotions) and what meaning it has for the 'reflector'. The 'I' becomes pivotal as a lens through which the world is seen and interacted with [...] I also learnt that to 'future pace' the learning in reflection is needed. [...] In other words in reflecting one has to loop back into the time and place when it was happening and then loop forward to a future context when it may be useful to apply the learning (part of systems thinking). (R/NRF, 8 April 2013<sup>21</sup>)*

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<sup>21</sup> In the code R/NRF, 8 April 2013 R stands for my own reflection /HRF stands for the National Research Fund action learning set followed by the date of the reflection.

From my personal experience outlined above, I coached (Holliday, 2001; McLeod, 2005; Buys, 2010; Scheepers, 2012) members of the action learning set to write reflections, as they had never done this before. I gave them a template to guide their thinking (Annexure O). Once I had explained the template and had shown them how I reflected, they were on their own, so that when they did their video journals, they would neither be afraid of the process nor would they merely be reporters. I wished to foster a critical stance towards reflection, so that they would be able to critique their own mindsets and behaviour, as well as those of others within the organisation. I wanted them to see reflection in the way Mortari (2015) illuminates what reflection ought to be:

When the mind thinks on itself, the subject engaged in the reflective practice plays at the same time the role of subject who reflects and object who is reflected, that is, he or she becomes the object of the analysis, and it is precisely through making oneself the object of self-enquiry that a person really becomes the subject of his or her experience. (Mortari, 2015:1)

Reflection, as such, is a metacognitive activity, where one critically questions and makes sense of one's thinking-acting experiences, which are inseparable from that which one is engaged in and reflecting on. There is a difference between a reflection process and a reflective process. To be reflexive and engage in reflexivity means that there is introspection, a critical analysis of what one is thinking, doing, and portraying in action. It is a critical analysis of the presuppositions made and the paradigms adopted, both epistemological and ontological, in carrying out tasks in the workplace. Coghlan and Brannick (2005:6) capture reflexivity well when they state that "systematic reflexivity is the constant analysis of one's own theoretical and methodological presupposition". In this chapter I have drawn on the reflections and reflexivity of the action learning set, in order to highlight the learning that they have gained. I submit that in some instances the members of the set have engaged in their own self-enquiry as participants within the research process, by being critically reflexive of their own actions. By honing their ability to be reflexive and to reflect, they are now empowered to reflect more deeply on their own management practice, in order to bring about change and enhance wellness in the college.

In addition to reflective writing, they also learnt techniques such as the *nominal group technique* (NGT), as a democratic process to ensure that all members have a voice, and that all members have equally weighted votes in decisions that are made. In the action learning members' case the decisions as to what the group would be called, and what logo would be used for the group, and the prioritisation of a set of values that formed the basis of a poster campaign resulted from the use of the NGT (Figure 6.4).



**Figure 6.4 Scoring of values using the nominal group technique**

The above picture was taken during the nominal group technique (NGT) process, where members had voted and scored. The picture demonstrates the high level of participation that contributes to a democratic outcome that is accepted by all. I have dealt with the NGT in more detail in chapter 5, but I merely mention it here as an example of a skill acquisition that was acquired as this technique was a learning experience for all the members, as they were unfamiliar with the process. Hence, through the process of action research cycle 2, members acquired skills that were transferable to other areas of their management responsibilities such as the nomination and election of staff to undergo training, attend workshops or serve on campus committees.

The members were exposed to the concept of *Open Space Technology* (Owen, 2008), which is used in dialogic OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2014b:81), and they gained experience in running such workshops by attending the two critical caring conversation cafés that I facilitated as part of our intervention strategy in cycle 3. Figure 6.5 depicts the invitation that was given to each employee at the corporate centre. The name of the college has been removed for reasons of confidentiality. The invitations were also displayed on the notice boards. The meetings were held on Friday mornings, and they resulted in the corporate centre lobbying that a staff meeting be held quarterly, which is in line with what the campuses are expected to do. Top management

showed a willingness to accommodate this request, and they have implemented the employees' request.

# Open Café for Critical, Caring, Courageous Conversations

YOU ARE INVITED FOR A CUP OF COFFEE Venue: Here!!!

Date & Time : 11:30 on Friday, 11 Sept 2015

TOPIC: ██████████ a Caring Compassionate  
Workplace – If not, how do we create it?



CURATIO – WE CARE!!!

**Figure 6.5: The invitation that was given to attend the critical caring conversation cafés (name of college removed for ethical reasons)**

I took time to explain what is meant by critical caring conversation cafés as part of Open Space Technology, and how they relate to organisational development as a process of dialogic OD. In addition, I also explained each of the words “critical”, “caring” and “courageous conversations” in the light of toxicity and values. I then offered employees the opportunity to respond to the question for the session, namely “Is [name of the college removed for reasons of confidentiality] a caring compassionate workplace? If not, how do we make it a caring, compassionate workplace?”

The photograph in Figure 6.6 portrays staff at the Open Space Technology critical caring conversation café writing down on A4 sheets of paper the topic that they wanted discussed. These sheets were then pinned on the whiteboard on the back wall of the room, and they were used as the agenda for the meeting. Each person then spoke to their question, and input was received from the participants. Due to the fact that all employees were treated equally, even the voices of the interns were heard among those of the top management officials. The items on the agenda confirmed that communication was a problem in the college, and the same values that were identified by the action learning set came up for discussion, which indicates internal peer validation.



**Figure 6.6: Employees at the critical caring conversation café, setting the agenda**

While all the action learning set members were exposed to the theory of Open Space Technology, and they all received a copy of the manual, and some members actually attended the meetings, there was still hesitancy among them to run their own cafés. This feeling was expressed by one of the campus managers, who felt that it is too risky at this stage to run such a café at her campus. The fact that she was not yet ready to run such a café does not mean that she had not learnt, comprehended, or understood the concept and the value of Open Space Technology, but is an example of a different type of learning in action, which is spelt out by Vince (2008) and referred to as learning inaction. Learning inaction is a learning that can be expressed within the set, at a conscious level or a gut level, where there is an intuition that holds one back from taking action (running a café in this case), due to a feeling that to do so would be politically and emotionally inexpedient. In hindsight, I would agree that she was right in her learning inaction, as the staff were not ready at that time for that type of intervention. Nevertheless, they now have a strategy that they can use at their campuses in order to start discussions around topics that are not easy to deal with in a normal staff meeting, such as gender and race issues.

The fact that the action learning set members opened themselves up to believing that they can learn from others, and that the notion of experts is flawed, indicates a change in their epistemology, and that they have embraced an inclusive participatory paradigm. They are now in a position to work no longer in silos, but in networks of learning, where learning is relational. What I mean by “relational” is that the complexity of ideas, views, and practices that the set interacts with, reflects on, and dialogues with contributes to the way in which understanding and meaning is reached.

One of the fundamentals of action research, working from within a post-positivist paradigm, is that we are learning together, and that there are no experts, and thus there is no place for arrogance, where one person knows all that there is to know on a particular subject. In action research, knowledge that is evolving is socially constructed within the network of ideas shared between curious learners. Through the process of this research, the members of the set were constantly reminded that research is a humbling experience, as it is a seeking to improve knowledge and practice, and is not an end in itself. One of the members indicated a willingness to open up to what others are doing and to learn from others' practice in order to improve his own practice, when he made the following statement: *"I've learnt a lot from the way they, how can I say, you know, handle situations, and then you think, 'Ah, that might be a good way. Let's try it."* (EEA, 2016).

This opportunity to learn from each other would not have been his experience previously, as there was little participation, little sharing, and a lack of trust, as the emphasis was on differences, rather than on the similarities between employees, bearing in mind the diverse cultures that are found in a post-apartheid state college. Before, managers tended to work in silos, as competitors, not as colleagues.

When answering the question as to what the participants had learnt about colleagues in the action learning set, one of the members said that he felt that being in the set allowed him to *improve relationships through participation*. He alluded to the contributing factors that allowed him to better understand his colleagues. One of these factors was that you get to know colleagues through participation – being part of the action learning set brings a sense of identity and belonging to the group. Another factor is involvement in the activities. It is not just belonging that gives a sense of identity, but becoming actively involved raises the matter to a level of commitment to the group and what the group is doing. In the HR literature, the word "engagement" is often used, even though there is no single or generally accepted definition of the term (Markos & Sridevi, 2010:90). "Engagement" is a much stronger word than "involvement", and it carries positive connotations of mutual, two-way relationships, where the employer creates a space for willingness for the employee to demonstrate commitment to the company. I use the word "engagement" where participants are welcomed and encouraged to enter the space created for inclusive participation. The combination of participation and commitment within the group fosters interaction – dialogue and participation has a positive influence on the work environment and the psychosocial well-being of employees (Knudsen, Busck & Lind, 2011). This member of the set stated it well in the following response: *"I think I'm correct if I say participation, you know, involvement and participation, because the more you*

*involve them, the more they become nearer to you. The more they participate, the more you interact.” (GEA, 2016).*

It follows that when there is involvement and participation, acceptance of one another and communication also improves. This process is important in the diverse workplaces that are characteristic of South Africa, which are striving for democracy and equality, particularly in the public sector. I purposely want to demonstrate how acceptance of people from other ethnic backgrounds can contribute to improved race relations. Race relations can be improved when there is an engagement of willing participation and commitment to a project by members of an action learning set, where solving problems, rather than taking positions, becomes the primary concern. I would normally only refer to managers as managers, irrespective of their race or gender or age, without referring to colour, but in this particular instance, to prove my point, I have to refer to the colour of the manager. A black manager in the action learning set indicated the change that has taken place in the college when he spoke as follows about improved communication:

*There’s a lot of improvements. Most of my colleagues we are managers in different areas, and the manner in which we used to argue things, we argue them differently. [...] We don’t argue them to say “No, I’ve got a standing point”. [...] We argue them with the intention to come up with solutions. (FEA, 2016).*

A white manager in the set, addressing the same issue, responded as follows:

*We are much more the same than we are different. Because we look different, but we are all in the same position. And some of them I am closer to than others in the action learning set, but we learnt to refer to each other. [...] So the communication between us as colleagues on the same level became much better. (CEA, 2016).*

It is evident from the responses of the above two managers that the members of the set learnt to accept each other, work with each other, solve problems together, and communicate better, and in so doing contributed to improving race relations within the college. Some of the behaviour of white employees is interpreted as racism. For example if two vehicles are being used to the same venue whites will travel in one car and black employees in the other. There is no integration and it is noticeable that white employees do not attend funerals of black employees in the townships. Race relations had to be addressed by the principal in a memo in 2009 (Figure 6.7). This was the year that saw a senior manager being dismissed, who has since been reinstated. Many of the complaints raised by unions were of a racial nature.

Unfortunately, the concept of the rainbow nation has lost its impact, as South Africa still has to address racial issues, due to the legacy of apartheid. The above responses carry more weight when understood against the history of the college, which is reflected in the content of the memo below. The memo is interesting from the perspective that racism had to be dealt with in a memo to all staff, in order for the principal to cover himself in the eyes of his superiors, and from the point of view that the predominantly white unions NAPTOSA and SATU were not copied in the memo, which raised suspicions among the white employees as to why had been left out. Thus, the values of transparency and inclusivity were denied in this action.

MEMO	
To	: Campus Managers
Attention	: All Staff members
Cc	: NEHAWU, SADTU
	Chief Director: AET
	Director: Education Labour Relations Council
	Director: FET Directorate
From	: [NAME REMOVED FOR CONFIDENTIALITY REASONS]
Date	: 29 May 2009
: <b>Racism Task Team</b>	
<p>A Task Team has been formed to investigate perceived racism at [name removed for confidentiality reasons] FET College. Staff members should note that Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act no 4 of 2000 forbids racism in a workplace.</p> <p>Section 6 of the act provides that no person may unfairly discriminate against any other person on the grounds of race, including the exclusions of a particular race group under any rule or practice that appears to be legitimate but which is actually aimed at maintaining exclusive control by a particular race group.</p> <p>[Name removed for confidentiality reasons] FET College is committed to building and maintaining a work and study environment where people from different racial backgrounds are able to perform their tasks free from discrimination and discriminatory harassment.</p> <p><b>WHAT IS RACIAL DISCRIMINATION?</b></p> <p><b>Racial discrimination</b> is any verbal, physical or written act, which is based solely on a person's race. This includes discriminating against people on account of their colour, ethnic or social origin or nationality.</p> <p><b>Unfair racial discrimination</b> is where a person is treated less favourably on account of their race. It is not unfair to discriminate on the basis of race if it is for the purposes of achieving employment equity.</p>	

**Figure 6.7: The principal's memo to address perceived racism**

What was being portrayed in the statements of the two managers was that in the past, race issues, more so than now, divided employees, hence the principal's memo that addressed racism (perceived or otherwise). Managers at that stage argued from positions that were often related to colour and power, and not from a position of what was best for the college. Now, through engagement in the set, the members realise that there are more similarities than differences (including colour), and acceptance of others now makes it easier to solve common problems. By valuing participation, the action learning set members are now in a position to check their own management style, to ensure that it is participatory, and to be held accountable for the values that they espoused during the poster campaign. Their values become their own standards by which their colleagues in a culturally diverse workplace hold them accountable.

### **6.5 Collaboration and mutual support**

The action learning set members learnt that in dealing with matters pertaining to their everyday management in a toxic environment, it is strategic to collaborate on issues, so that you are not isolated and held accountable for actions and outcomes apart from a collective. In order to avoid being unduly harassed or victimised for management decisions that may not be popular, campus managers looked for a united voice. By collaborating, members were not only making common decisions, but were also guaranteeing each other support for in case things went wrong. One manager put it like this:

*I'm phoning my colleagues on a regular basis. [...] We communicate with an SMS to say "This is happening with me. What are you doing?" [...] We learnt to refer to each other. [...] We learnt to refer to each other. And even now, [name withheld for confidentiality reasons] and I, if we... before we make a decision, I phone her. She asks me, "What are you doing?" I say, "I am doing this." She says, "I'm with you there." So at least the two of us are doing the same thing. [...] I have quite a few situations where [name withheld for confidentiality reasons] also called me and says, "Just tell me, are you doing this?" And when we check each other, we are actually doing the same thing. (EEA, 2016).*

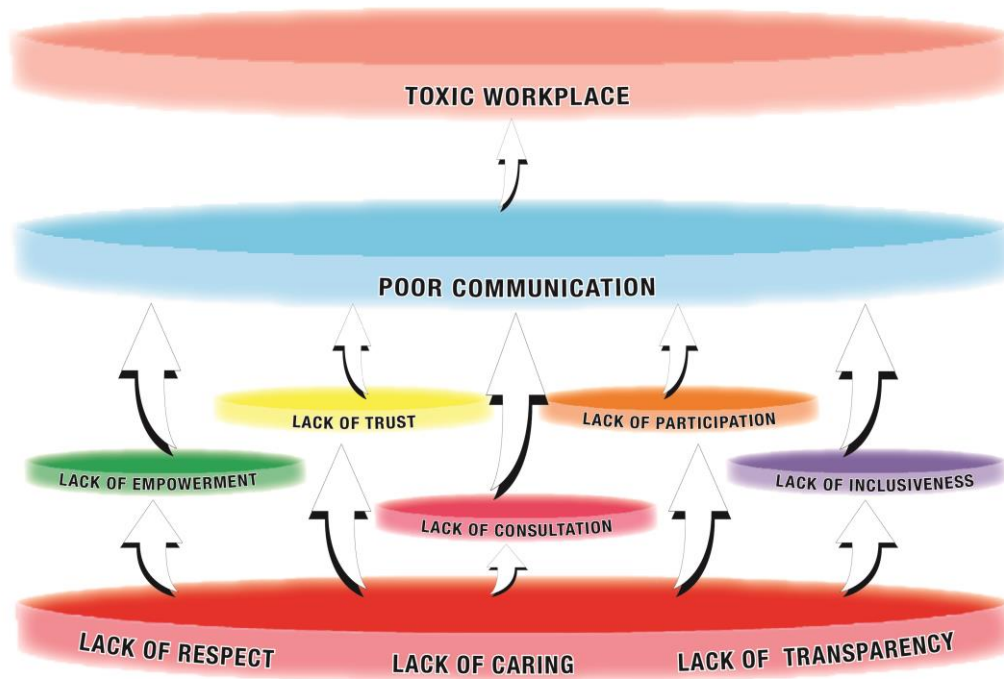
Through the participation, engagement, and collaboration, communication has improved, and members have learnt that they are being supported by each other, so that they are not isolated. In a toxic environment, a strategy of bullies is to isolate their victims (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2011). In the above case, it is probably not bullying, as bullying is a repeated behaviour that is consistent (Gilbert, Carr-Ruffino, Ivancevich & Konopaske, 2012), but it is nevertheless toxic. Members were protecting themselves against being isolated, by offering each other mutual support, as one member states: *"What I've learnt about my colleagues is that all of us*

*we are able to support one another. [...] So that's what I've learnt from my colleagues: that at least we are there for each other now.*" (AEA, 2016).

What this last member is indicating is that support is not merely of a technical nature, for example interpreting and implementing policies, or assisting with pivot tables in an Excel spreadsheet, but support of the emotional kind, which demonstrates compassion (Lilius, Kanov, Dutton, Worline & Maitlis, 2011) in the workplace by fellow colleagues. Workplace compassion is, firstly, a noticing of, a becoming aware of, a mindfulness of, the suffering of others, and, secondly, it is identification with the victim who is suffering, which is more than just empathy, because it ultimately results in a deliberate action to help to alleviate the suffering of the colleague in the workplace (Lilius, Worline, Maitlis, Kanov, Dutton & Frost, 2008). I was delighted to read the transcripts above, for two reasons. Firstly, they show that these members have learnt strategies to bring about wellness within the workplace, and that they are applying life-enhancing values in their everyday activities. The importance and role of values as drivers in organisational development is also acknowledged, through their care for and support of each other. Secondly, they confirm that the action learning set's choice of name Curatio for the group is a symbol of change, and that it introduces new words, and hence it is an example of using dialogic organisational development in this study.

The action learning set members' grasp and understanding of the values that contribute to improved communication is highlighted by the output of a brainstorming session, after they had identified that problems in communication contributed to much of the trauma and stress that they were experiencing, as reflected in collage 1 (Figure 6.1) above, and as tabulated in Table 5.2. The emphasis on identifying the life-enhancing values in the second cycle, and the planning of an advocacy campaign around values, which, if enhanced, will ensure that the college is a values-driven organisation, is directly aligned to the chapter on my theoretical framework, where I dealt with the place of values in an organisation. Working within that theoretical framework, the action learning set noted that the college's stated values (Annexure P) of accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, quality, redress of educational opportunities, accessibility, and sustainable development were being denied. In fact, some of the stated "values" are not values at all. The action learning set, as part of their planned programme, was to embrace life-enhancing values, and to incorporate them into changing the conversations in the college, through dialogic organisational development.

Figure 6.8 portrays a model that the action learning set developed to explain their understanding of how negation of values was leading to communication issues, which, in turn, was resulting in toxicity.



**Figure 6.8: The values model developed by the action learning set**

The above model grew out of the NGT and the brainstorming session on values. While the action learning set only chose five of the values for the poster campaign, when designing this model they included the value of caring. The line of reasoning follows logically through the interrelated value networks. When there is no respect, caring, or transparency, the other values are compromised, so that there is a lack (a deficit) of inclusiveness, participation, trust, empowerment, and consultation. When all or some of these values are denied, the effect is that communication suffers, and when communication suffers, the end result of this process is that employees suffer, as a result of toxic leaders, toxic followers, and toxic systems. For example, a toxic leader who could not care less about an employee does not feel that they need to consult the employee or include their inputs, and as a result, they may withhold information from the employee but demand that they meet the required standards. The employee is not able to deliver, and is reprimanded, and they are too scared to ask questions because the employer shouts at and belittles the staff. The employee is thus rendered powerless to defend their actions because of the power imbalance brought about by their position within the organisation.

## **6.6 Acknowledging change within people and processes**

Organisational change occurs at various levels, and it is encouraging to perceive members acknowledging system changes and a change to more positive attitudes in the leadership. In a toxic environment, the culture is often portrayed as “them against us” – for example, leaders

versus subordinates, bullies versus victims, and the powerful versus the powerless. This language of dichotomy is changing as the conversations are changing, and the action learning set has learnt to notice the changes, acknowledge the change, and appreciate the change. Below are concrete examples of acknowledged system changes and relationship changes between the SMT and their managers:

*So they see the need for me to communicate with them. They give me a slot with SMT, where I can then... I get the first opportunity. So if I address my stuff, then I'm excused. But at least in the past it was "Yes, I need to see you, but I'm too busy". And then the "too busy" becomes two weeks, three weeks. [...] I think, "Ag well, I'm not really important to them." [...] Now, at least every Monday I get the call and say, "[Name removed for reasons of confidentiality], we are ready. We might be half an hour late, but we see you at 09:30, you know." [...] You know, it's easy to criticise, but if you are there in SMT, you see what type of problems they have to deal with. You also become more understanding. [...] I'm picking up that they are at least trying. (EEA, 2016).*

*There's a change in the organisation. We are given trust. [...] And the organisation has changed, because the organisation now allows it. [...] And they are... I think they are expecting it from us. [...] It's not... you're not wrong and more to think. You are now allowed to think and act. [...] I feel trusted by my superiors to handle the situation. So that changed definitely. (CEA, 2016).*

The action learning set members have demonstrated a more forgiving attitude towards senior managers who may have displayed toxic leadership traits, without having lost their ability to be critical of injustices and poor leadership. What they are doing is contributing to a more positive culture within the workplace, which counteracts the tendency to resort to the blame game, which is toxic in itself.

## **6.7 The learning of the members: its impact, and its sustainability**

In answering my research question, namely "How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current toxicity which is experienced every day?", this chapter has spoken thus far to the learning of my action learning set as a result of my influence. I now offer evidence of the impact of their learning on others, and how they are strategising and implementing processes to enhance values and improve communication in their area of influence:

*I went home stressed, angry, afraid. [...] I was always afraid of the unions, because the unions have so much power, and that's a game I learnt to play now. [...] I'm coping much better. [...] I think it's because there's now trust between me and my people at my level. [...] I'm actually allowing myself to take sick leave now when I'm actually sick, because I'm not a control freak anymore, because they know what to do. [...] I am communicating much more on a personal basis with some people. I'm telling my staff everything, everything that we do. Everything. I'm not censoring it anymore. I'm not trying to hide that some decisions are poor decisions. (CEA, 2016).*

In the above response, the action learning set member demonstrates, firstly, that the living value of trust is being exercised between her and her subordinates. Secondly, she is transparent with her staff which also indicates that she is respectful of them, as they have a right to know. What interests me is that these values are embedded in her improved communication. Her experiences align with the values model that they developed. Finally, she has a strategy of giving herself permission to do a, b, or c, which in this case is taking leave. The assumption is that she would not do it previously, as she wanted to be in control, and did not want to relinquish this control, as she did not trust her staff. Now that she is exercising trust, the result of not being a 'control freak' (her exact expression in the quote above)) is experienced as an improvement in health and well-being, as she is less stressed. Using her phrase, 'control freaks' often experience high levels of anxiety and stress, due to the pressure to perform that they place on themselves, because they care more about something than others (Parrott, 2001). By moving away from the notion that she must be in control, she has understood both chaos theory and complexity theory, which have informed this study. Chaos theory is clear that there is no predictability, and that things often happen at the edge of chaos, where change suddenly without warning takes place. While this may look random, there are laws governing such activity, but to have control over those happenings is impossible. Trying to control what looks like random behaviour is both naïve and stressful, as this member discovered. She is now able to cope better, because she also realises that there are a network of human interactions taking place on her campus, and that she can allow emergence of behaviour to cope with any crisis that may occur, by relying on her network to take care of it. I am using emerge here in relation to chaos theory that in her network out of the blue she can experience support from groups or individuals that emerge out of the blues, on their own. She has learnt to trust the network of relationships that also have her wellness at heart. Hence she can take leave when not feeling well.

Another member notices the changes that are taking place and is motivating employees in his department, and in this way is influencing others positively. He illustrates this when he says the

following: *“Members are losing hope, and I think, you know, the flickering of hope is where you see those little changes, and I tell staff in my division that even if you can’t see it, there are changes.”* (EEA, 2016).

The value of participation and inclusiveness is encapsulated in the following response, which illustrates that the member has learnt to appreciate others and their role within the college. These values are also entrenched in the model that the action learning set developed (Figure 6.8).

*Look, an organisation is built out of people, out of human beings, and whatever you do in the organisation, you can achieve it through the assistance of other people. So the word “we” is very important. [...] I am leading, but there are people behind me who makes me to achieve what I want to achieve, so the “we” to me plays the better role.* (FEA, 2016).

The action learning set members influenced their colleagues through the poster campaign, which resulted in participants developing content after a template was agreed upon. The reason for the template was to keep the message structured, and to have professional-looking posters displayed at college sites. The values described in the posters were discussed with employees, and they acted as catalysts for changing language and improving communication. Then, by using technology such as WhatsApp,<sup>22</sup> some members impacted the communication process among employees, and at the same time changed the language of the organisation, to bring it in line with dialogic OD, by having themes that advocate values, as illustrated in the following response by member of the action learning set:

*You know, like we started a campus WhatsApp group, and the matters that we share with staff members are about, you know, toxicity in the work environment, and how we can avoid that. [...] And it’s not only in the... the WhatsApp group. Even staff members, you know, when you discuss among them, just casual conversation, you hear them saying, you know, this is just a toxic environment, and they... like this morning, someone was saying, “Ma’am, are you aware that it’s International Smile Day? So we must all smile.” [...] I think the reason why we started the WhatsApp group was that people... we need to communicate, you know, and we have the IT lecturers, the computer lecturers. They’ve also started their own WhatsApp group.* (AEA, 2016).

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<sup>22</sup> A mobile cellular messaging application that works across various communication platforms.

Apart from the poster campaigns, one member using Facebook and Twitter as communication platforms implemented dialogic OD strategies of changing the language used in the organisation's conversations, through positive slogans, such as "Keep doing good" and 'Be better', in her campus. She reported on this as follows:

*I've had two campaigns on my campus. Last year we had a campaign that we hashtagged #keep on doing good, which every day we reminded ourselves. It started with the... from Mother Theresa... there's a little quote from Mother Theresa, and in the end she says, "Keep on doing good, because it's never between you and the other person. It is always between you and God, no matter what happens." [...] So that campaign was very successful on my campus. [...] This year our campaign is #be better. [...] So with the two campaigns, reminding each other of it, incorporating it into our openings on a Monday, we are communicating better. So I've learnt a lot there. (CEA, 2016).*

What is important to note is that it was not a once-off activity, but that it was incorporated into the Monday meetings of the action learning set, and it was a prolonged conversation that operated on neutral platforms (Twitter and Facebook), where all could participate in and feel included in the campaign. What this member is accomplishing through this intervention is enhancing the values that we are trying to live out in the workplace, and contributing to making dialogic organisational development possible, through changing the conversations in the college.

The last influence of the action learning set that deserves attention is the contribution that it has made to the strategic plan of the college (Figure 6.9) where the members are hard at work completing a SWOT analysis



**Figure 6.9 Action Learning set working on a SWOT analysis**

The members of the set conducted two SWOT analysis exercises. The first was a personal SWOT analysis, which was done to discuss our strengths and weaknesses as participants in the project. The second SWOT analysis, which was done at the same meeting of the set, was on the corporate centre as the administrative hub of the college. When the members had an opportunity to discuss their contributions, it was a very frank and honest discussion, which resulted in a combined SWOT analysis. The SMT had to produce a strategic plan, the way they always did every five years. In 2015 they were stuck, because they had not done a SWOT analysis, and they needed one urgently. All the action learning set members were present at the quarterly management meeting, and I asked each member if we could not suggest that the SMT use the SWOT analysis that we had produced as an action learning set. With the agreement of all the members, I suggested that the SMT use the SWOT analysis that we had done.

The SMT took our SWOT analysis, removed the parts of it that were perhaps perceived as negative criticism of the leadership and the management, and added a few points of their own, but 80% of what we had in our analysis was used in the final version. Three important points can be made from this scenario. Firstly, the SMT were prepared to incorporate the managers' inputs into a strategic document, which is normally produced by top management. All of the managers in the action learning set, bar one, are middle managers, or operational managers, and are not seen as strategic managers in a TVET environment. This indicates a change in the way the SMT is viewing its managers, and that it is starting to trust them and include them in all levels of decision-making in the college. Secondly, the action learning set members felt that they were appreciated for the work they had done, and that they could influence and contribute to the direction the college could take. Finally, their impact in just this very small part of the strategic

plan indicates that they are able to influence on a wider scale, as the five-year strategic plan gives direction for the college council and for all employees to operationalise the strategic plan, in order to reach the college's mandate and goals.

## **6.8 Summary**

I conclude this chapter by suggesting that I have allowed the action learning set members' voices to be heard, through their participation in the various activities of the two action research cycles, and particularly through the semi-structured open-ended questions that were asked while they were grooming the horses (Figure 6.2). What the members engaged in during the cycles brought about their own learning, as they reflected on and became reflexive in their own practice. They were active in the action learning process. They found their own voice, and they could not only confidently articulate their pain of being victims in a toxic workplace, but could identify changes in their own practice and acknowledge changes in the attitudes and practices of their leaders. Within the action learning set, they have found likeminded managers, who want change and who offer a support base, a safety net to which they can turn for help and advice. Over and above that, they are naming toxicity for what it is, and they have understood how they dealt with it in the past, and what negative effects this has on well-being. Their own healing has started, through the understanding they have acquired of the effects of stress caused by the toxic leaders, the toxic followers, and the toxic systems in the college. They are coping with stress by depersonalising issues, living out their life-enhancing values of trust, participation, inclusiveness, empowerment, and consultation. They are taking personal responsibility for their own health and well-being, and are caring for others. Having taken care of themselves has put in them in a stronger position to confidently challenge the status quo, by being assertive, and at the same time to influence those that they rub shoulders with every day to improve their wellness, by caring for them and changing the conversations within the workplace. They are experiencing hope, the kind of hope that they expressed in their second collage, depicted in Figure 6.10 below.



**Figure 6.10: The second collage, expressing hope**

In the second collage, the hopes of the managers are evident, and when I compare the two collages (Figure 6.1), there are noticeable differences. Firstly, in the second collage (Figure 6.10), the colours are much brighter. Secondly, the images are more positive, namely flowers, trees, and roots, which suggest growth and flourishing. Thirdly, words such as “pain” have been replaced by words such as “happy” and “Bye-bye old”, which suggests that the managers have moved from past negative experiences to positive aspirations, which indicates that there is hope to have positive change in the college. The learning that the action learning set members gained of themselves, and the learning gained to improve wellness, will contribute positively to them realising some of their aspirations depicted in their drawings in this collage.

When I reflect on the content of this chapter and the responses of the action learning set members regarding what they have learnt, I am convinced, firstly, that they have been working within the theoretical framework as set out in chapter 3, which underpins this study. Secondly, I am convinced that the members have learnt about themselves in relation to toxicity. Thirdly, I am persuaded that they have learnt to influence others through life-enhancing values, and through using dialogic OD to change conversations in order to bring about wellness. In the next chapter, I tie all the threads together and produce a personal reflection on the study, culminating in a model of relational organisational development, which is my living theory.

## **PART 3 THRIVING AT THE EDGE OF CHAOS**

### **CHAPTER 7 CONCLUDING THE THESIS: REFLECTING ON LEARNING, CONTRIBUTIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

In this final chapter my approach is to tie the threads together from the previous chapters through a personal reflection of the process of engaging in action research that leads to a living theory of organisational development in a TVET college. My argument runs like a golden thread through the study, namely that by integrating elements of dialogic organizational development practices and life enhancing values into my practice, a positive contribution can be made to reducing organisational toxicity and improving employees' perceptions of wellbeing which in turn influenced change towards a healthier work climate.

As I engage in writing up this reflection I do so from the perspective of answering my research question that I wove into each of the previous chapters, namely, "How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current climate of toxicity which is experienced every day?". In order to give some structure to the reflection I will adhere to the following outline that in my opinion covers what ought to be in a final chapter in a research project.

- A reflective summary of the action research project
- Reflecting on whether I met my objectives
- Reflecting on the validity of the findings
- Reflecting on the limitations of the study
- Reflecting on my contribution to knowledge
- Reflecting on the significance of my study for my practice and other spheres of influencer
- Reflecting on the impact, sustainability and further areas for research
- Reflecting on why no recommendations
- Concluding remarks

#### **7.2 A reflective summary of the action research project**

As I reflect on this study I do so with the following framework in mind; what did I do, what went well and why and what did not go well and why? The project spanned 30 months and consisted of 3 cycles. Cycle 1 was my individualistic attempt to bring about change through promoting values that I thought would be accepted and implemented to improve the wellness of the organization. Cycle 2 was undertaken as a result of the failure of the first cycle and in this cycle

I identified, established and maintained an action learning set as partners in the change process. Through collaboration and participation, the participants in the action learning set identified a logo and chose a name (Curatio – we care) for the group and established an identity that spoke to the need for wellness and caring in a toxic organisation. In order for the action learning set's identity to go public, I had T-Shirts printed with the logo on the front. Apart from the group establishing their own identity this going public was important as it was part of the awareness strategy to reach out to other college employees, but also to communicate that the group was not established, or doing things in a clandestine manner. Due to the lack of trust within the college the action learning set wanted to be transparent about who they were and what they were doing in order to address toxicity within the college. Action learning set members wore these T-shirts to work on Fridays. I listened to these members express their toxic experiences through drawing a collage and supported them to find their voice as they narrated what they had drawn. I also assisted them to reflect on their experiences which they did so through video journals. In order not to leave the action learning set members anchored to a negative space having only drawn and reflected on their emotionally traumatic events depicted in the first collage, a second collage was completed where they expressed their hopes and aspirations for the future of the college. The first collage became a reference point as to where we were, the second collage was a projection, a vision of an improved work climate, a place that we wanted in the future. By having these two reference points we asked ourselves the question; how can we move from A to B? Through jointly analysing the data from the collages we were able to identify a number of life enhancing values that were being denied. We established that when these values are denied, communication is negatively affected with the result that employees suffer emotional trauma. Using the nominal group technique (NGT), the values were prioritised and the group agreed during a brain storming session to deal with only five of the values; trust, participation, collaboration, consultation and inclusion. In the beginning they had also identified communication as a value, but then realised that communication was not a value, but the prime example of what mediates toxicity when values are denied. We believed that if these values were enhanced there would be better communication and as a result improved wellness would be experienced. Two SWOT analyses were completed by each participant, one a personal SWOT analysis and then one for the Corporate Centre. This was not done for diagnostic purposes but to juxtapose our strengths with the weaknesses of the Corporate Centre to ensure that we could bring about change and to internally validate how the values that we identified as being denied spoke to the weaknesses of the Corporate Centre.

This line of questioning as to what values were being denied led into Cycle 3. In this third cycle members agreed on a poster campaign to advocate for the importance of life enhancing values in the work place to improve communication and lessen toxicity (see Appendix. Managers

participated with their colleagues in designing A3 size posters that I laminated and returned to campus managers for display at strategic points in the campuses. I followed a similar process and had three sets displayed at the Corporate Centre on each of the landings and in the entrance foyer. We wore the Curatio T-Shirts and explained at staff meetings how the values related to poor communication that in turn contributed to toxicity in the workplace. At the Corporate Centre I ran two Critical Caring Conversation Cafés which were open to all employees at the Corporate Centre to attend. During these Café meetings the values of participation and inclusion that the action set had identified were again raised by other employees who were not part of the action learning set and this further validated the data generated by the managers who participated in the action learning set. As an action learning set we had a celebration breakfast in December 2016 and had a braai (barbeque) at a barn on a horse riding school and closed the project with regards to this study.

### **7.3 Reflecting on whether I met my objectives**

The aims and objectives of the self-study were clearly laid out in chapter 1, where I indicated that the effects of the toxicity within the organisation were negatively affecting my health and the health of other employees within the college. Firstly, as an HRD Manager I wanted, from an epistemological position, to be able to render an account of my own learning so that I am better able to know what I know, and how I have come to know how life enhancing values and dialogic organisational development can help reduce toxicity within an organisation and ultimately improve personal and organisational wellness

Secondly, I wanted to influence other managers to improve their learning and their practice. When I reflect on these two objectives from an epistemological and ontological stance, I am able to understand my andragogic<sup>23</sup> journey. I have given an account of my learning in chapter 5 and acknowledge a change in my practice from individualistic attempts to get others to buy in to my values to a more collective approach. Initially, I was clearly working from a positivist paradigm that influenced and clouded my understanding of self and others in the workplace.

However, at that time, I would have denied being individualistic. I had always seen myself as a team player, having played provincial cricket, not realising at the time that sport itself had

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<sup>23</sup> I prefer to use the term andragogic (adult learning) rather than pedagogic (Child learning) as I believe Knowles makes a case for the way adults learn as a parallel approach to child or youth learning based on a humanistic perspective of adult development. The four principles of andragogy are that adults are self-directed and not dependent learners, adults have a reservoir of experience and knowledge on which to draw and build, the readiness to learn are linked to social and biological factors and they are driven by time so that they want immediate application of knowledge often linked with problem solving. In human resource development field, dealing with adult learning and development the term is widely understood (Hagen and Park 2016)

encouraged me to believe in my own abilities at the expense of others. Although cricket is a great team game, it fosters individuality as it is either you with ball in hand to bowl or you with a bat in hand, to bat against the opposing team's eleven players. From an ontological perspective I had grown up in a home where my mother had stressed individualism by reminding me constantly that if you want something done do it yourself, do not rely on others. This advice is steeped in the paradigm of Western individualism. I am now better able to see how I have shifted from this pseudo innocence of denying individualism towards embracing participatory forms of being. In spite of my tacit knowledge gained while working with students as a vice rector of a teachers training college in an African context which supports community over individualisation and values stakeholder inclusion and collaboration, I still tried to make changes on my own. On reflection, I held those values of participation and inclusiveness dear for myself, but selectively denied them to others and therefore was in reality living a lie. I was not living Ubuntu principles in a consistent manner. I have learnt that it may initially take longer to generate buy-in and support in a participatory approach, but in the long run, time is saved and change is deeper as people work together to attain similar ideals. I now continually check my own practice and that of others to ensure that we respect and adhere to the values of participation, collaboration and inclusiveness at all levels of the organisation.

The learning that I have just explained impacts on my understanding of organisational development. Very often organisational development is perceived to be restructuring. Restructuring occurs at different levels and is identifiable by a change in reporting lines, a new organogram, new job descriptions, a new vision and mission statement underpinned with a values statement. This form of organisational development normally rests with top management and is seen as a top down approach to bringing about change within the organisation. Employees within the organisation are often overlooked and become the recipients of a planned change process that they have not had input into or influenced in any way. In order to overcome this, top managers then have to have processes in place to obtain buy-in from disgruntled employees slowing down the change process. The motivation for undertaking such activities are often related to cost cutting measures, to increase productivity, stream line the organisation to outside influences (economy and competition) and form stronger teams and improve marketability. The emphasis for change rests on profitability and capital gain and has little to do with improving the lives of employees, who generate the income for the organisation.

Another way of seeing organisational development is from the bottom up. If change takes place in the workplace, based on what is experienced in the workplace and that involves employees at that level from the start then organisational development takes on a different meaning. Organisational development becomes personal as it starts with people, improving their lives as

employees. Based on this approach, people come first before the organisational structures. I firmly believe that for organisational change to be meaningful, lasting and effective, it must start with people.

In chapter 3 I already indicated that organisational change happens one person at a time. Dialogic Organisation literature has indicated that the focus is on changing mind-sets and not behaviour. Organisational development and change does not lie in the hands of experts, be they top managers, 'HR specialists' or consultants, but in the hands of all the employees, from cleaners to managers. The use of Open Space Technology (Owen, 2008) as explained in Chapter 5 is useful to level the playing field and give everyone a voice in the change process as it is during these meetings that communication patterns change. New language usage randomly emerges such as new words, slogans, symbols that become attractors and are self-sustainable and have the ability to bring about change rapidly in an organisation. The change of language that may emerge during the Open Space Café has the power to filter down into the daily operations within a college and bring about systemic changes as the new conversations disrupt the language that undergirds the status quo. The change in language, symbol or words may originate with anyone, irrespective of gender, race, age or position within the organisation. The hegemony of power, particularly in public bureaucratic institutions like a college, is challenged when interns can call senior managers to order without fear of victimisation as happened in the first Open Space Café meeting I held (Chapter 5).

The narration of the experiences of the action learning set members in the second cycle (Chapters 5 and population) validated my own psychological and physical experiences of being a victim of organisational toxicity. Emotional toxicity was indeed pervasive in the organisation as evidenced when the other managers in the action learning set unpacked their own toxic and traumatic experiences. I gained real insight and understanding into the hurt and pain of my fellow managers. While I was aware that toxicity was evident, through my own experiences, I never knew the depth of it and the effect it had on other managers. It was well hidden by my colleagues and I learnt that, to hide, suppress, ignore was a common strategy used by the managers to cope as I reported in the previous chapter.

I am aware that I would not have come to know their plight without setting up an action learning set that allowed trust to develop. The fact that I had ensured that the set was put together along equity principles of gender and race made this learning experience special as I indicated in the demographics of Table 4.1. I learnt from establishing, maintaining and working in a participatory, inclusive, and collaborative way with this group that trust amongst culturally diverse people can be reached when there is mutual respect. I knew tacitly that this could

happen, but I had not previously trusted my instincts to attempt to operationalize projects in this inclusive manner. I am now in a position to categorically trust my own learning that small group dynamics via action learning sets can work to foster good working relationships across diverse cultural groups that make up the college landscape in a post-apartheid South Africa.

The experience of being able to help members of the action learning set to identify their feelings and thus begin to deal with them in a positive manner, has given me the confidence to use activities such as drawing and reflection in other situations. Coupled with this is the fact that I have sharpened my calibration skills when dealing with body language. When I speak of calibration skills I am referring to the skill of depicting change in skin and voice tone, speed of language delivery, body language and gestures, eye accessing cues and any nonverbal cues. It is important in organisational development, especially when engaging in negotiations to have these skills, as often one is dealing with employees on a one on one basis or with groups, presenting ideas, offering feedback, evoking buy in or facilitating Open Space Café meetings. It is important to facilitate a meeting with sensitivity, taking into consideration the participants' needs and emotions. The ability to read body language and to respond with emotional intelligence helps to create an atmosphere where there is a willingness to be open and frank in discussing critical issues.

The reason why I have included this aspect of my learning in my reflection is to highlight the fact that I know what I know and how I have come to know what I know. From my training in pastoral counselling I know how to work with couples, families and mostly with individuals. I have become acutely aware of the art of calibration related verbal and nonverbal language as a way of understanding people's emotions in a small group. What I have learnt through facilitating the action learning set and open cafés is the competency and ability to work with large groups and still calibrate changes in emotional responses. I have gained the confidence to do this calibration knowing that I am competent to do so with positive results. Using Noel Burch's 'four stages for learning any skill' that he developed at Gordon International Training in the seventies, I am able to identify that I can now calibrate at a level where I am unconsciously competent, where I do not have to think about what I am doing as it now comes naturally.

When I reflect on the competency that I perceive myself to have now achieved, I have to acknowledge that I have gained it through learning to facilitate the action learning set where we shared deep emotional experiences with each other in a trusted respectful space. I was previously able to calibrate when dealing with one on one cases or in small groups like families but am now able to calibrate when there are a number of employees in the room. The benefit of being able to calibrate is knowing; when, how and why it may be necessary to change one's

own tone or speed of voice or if a physical tap on the shoulder or hand may be useful to settle emotions or to help a person to express an emotion or to gain trust. As an HRD manager who works with Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) I am called on often to counsel employees, thus my learning spills over from working with the action learning set into other key result areas (KRA) of my job profile.

Throughout the three cycles, my androgogic journey has led me to understand from my epistemological and ontological paradigm choices that the key to organisational development and to wellness rests on the basis of understanding relationships. Relationships are in turn cemented together by communication. These two elements, relationships and communication are pivotal in bringing about change within an organisation, person to person, group to group. In a network of complex relationships such as a college, the toxic environment is created and maintained through toxic relationships. Toxic leaders may not act alone. The same can be said for toxic followers especially if they belong to unions, or office politic cliques and these relationships turn bullying into mobbing (Branch, Ramsay & Barker, 2013). For positive relationships to form and sound communication to be effective, life enhancing values cannot be denied, or negated. If they are, their absence leads to dysfunctional organisations. Life enhancing values such as those identified by the action learning set in Chapter 6 (participation, inclusiveness, empowerment, trust and collaboration), when encouraged in an organisation, are like nutrients that support plants to grow and flourish.

In spite of the traumatic emotional experiences suffered in the work place, managers were able to continue their managerial functions by using their own coping strategies. Some of these strategies included suppressing emotions, that when employed over a long period of time, are detrimental to health as I argued in chapter 6. What is of interest to me in this study is that the only member of the set that was hospitalised with stress and cardiac related illnesses due to the toxicity of the college was a member that never fully participated and hence was not in a position to be supported by the other members or to have learnt how to manage and improve her own wellness. That may be one reason, but on the other hand this member had to deal directly deal with unions and students and hence the amount of stress experienced was enormous in comparison to what other manager's experienced. Hence, the level that she was operating at cannot be compared to the other members of staff. Nevertheless, while the other members were establishing strong inter-personal-relationships, based on mutual trust and respect within the group and practicing inclusivity, collaboration and participation, she chose to isolate herself and did not enter the space where healing was experienced. When I inquired as to why she was not coming to the meetings she indicated that in her mind her presence may hinder other people being open and free in their points of view. In spite of me reassuring her

that the group was a mature group of managers and that I would ensure that all voices had equal weight and had equal opportunity to participate she still did not attend.

I have observed in this study that empowering managers by supporting them, in the action learning set and encouraging them to tell their stories they are spurred on to create space for other employees to make their voices heard. In Cycle 3 (Chapter 6) some campus managers spoke proudly about what they were doing on their campuses in order to change the conversations using a dialogic OD approach in order not only to improve their wellbeing but the wellbeing of others. One manager had taken the opportunity to run two advocacy campaigns where staff had opted for motivating slogans that were discussed at their morning meetings and placed on social media for staff to disseminate and comment on. At another campus the manager had also utilised social media to change conversations. When they were running with these social media campaigns in the action learning set sessions we had spoken of various options of how we could change conversations, but no plans with time frames had been agreed upon or scheduled. Reflecting on what they had done and achieved by operationalising dialogic organisation principles encouraged me immensely to know that when conversations change at one level they emerge at another level, in a different context, driven by those who have been personally influenced to the extent that they want to bring hope and healing to others. The type of involvement and creativity that led to the use of social media, was not predictable, but is evidence of the principles of self-organising, emergence and self-sustainability common to chaos and complexity theories. Reflecting on the above scenario it ought not to have taken me by surprise as it is a manifestation of chaos theory that I elaborated on in Chapter 3. Within the chaos of a toxic organisation characterised by strikes, crisis management, and bullying, self-organising groups frequently emerge with their own agendas. What I have learnt is that managers who have to face uncertainty and, unpredictability as to employee or student behaviour, work at the edge of chaos. By this, I mean managers are faced with stress as they walk on a knife edge, where they wish to maintain equilibrium, control, and stability, but realise that random happenings outside their control can disrupt the entire workforce without any noticeable, observable clues as to what is about to happen.

For example. harmony amongst employees may change overnight. These unpredictable factions are self-organising, self-sustainable, and emerge with their own energy that takes root from within the organisation. They are capable of changing conversations to cause disharmony within the workforce. Managers as change agents must create containers or spaces (Bushe & Marshack, 2016; Corrigan, 2016) to facilitate positive conversations. Thus in this study where I shared some of the dialogic OD principles such as changing conversations with members of the action learning set, these principles were shared with other employees and impacted on two

campuses, reaching a further 140 other employees. A new vocabulary began to develop where they started using words such as toxicity to explain the climate in the organisation. Not only managers, but all employees are now starting to understand the organisation through different interpretive lenses, using new language constructs that demonstrate mind-set changes. This is evidenced by acts such as placing wellness on the college agenda as an important element for employees at work. From the concrete evidence of change and the testimony of participants to change having taken place I believe I met my objectives.

#### **7.4 Reflecting on the validity of the findings**

In order to ensure academic rigor of my systematic account of my educational learning and improved practice as well as my educational influence on others to improve their learning and practice, I must have sufficient evidence, presented in such a way that makes my claim to knowledge plausible and trustworthy. In undertaking action research I am not out to prove anything, as proof is not part of the epistemological paradigms that support this study. I do not regard truth as final and complete, but ever changing and socially constructed. I am aware of the ontological side of the notion of truth which is to be truthful in my reporting and reflection as I pursue a journey of discovery and learning in which I am obliged to make my research and the findings public, to open it up for public scrutiny and to be critiqued. In order for this to happen, a proper validation process must be undertaken.

Using the above position as a spring board for reflecting on the rigour of the study, I am able to claim that that I can defend this study in the public domain through the evidence that I have put forth as I reflect on my contribution to the question of validity (what really counts as research). I draw on Herr & Anderson, (2015) and later refer to Habermas' (1979) criteria to judge the validity and rigour of this qualitative research project. Herr and Anderson's criteria include:

- Outcome validity
- Process validity
- Democratic validity
- Catalytic validity
- Dialogic validity

**7.4.1 Outcome validity** is linked to the achievement or reaching the objectives of the project. To this end I have demonstrated that there is an improvement in my learning and practice as an HRD manager as I moved away from diagnostic OD to dialogic OD and influenced managers to find new personal coping strategies to reduce the effect of toxicity and improve their wellness and practice as managers. I no longer experience chest pains as a result of stress. As the members of the action learning set, myself included, began to make a conscious effort to live

out life enhancing values such as participation, inclusiveness, transparency, and trust, we found ourselves better able to handle emotional trauma as we established a critical caring community of managers and created a solid base for mutual support. Some of the toxic systems within the college have undergone changes since managers are now given space to report on their work to the Senior Management Team (SMT) and talk about their concerns. The SMT has also allowed and promoted change in the way the Corporate Centre communicates so that quarterly staff meetings are now taking place. The employees have also contributed to what they want to discuss at these meetings which is a major achievement as it indicates that SMT have changed their approach to management and are engaging with their employees more openly and regularly. The prevalence of the toxicity that was experienced prior to the study has diminished and employees have personal coping strategies in place to deal with the effect of toxicity. While the aspirations, hopes and desires of the second collage are not yet fully realised, improvement has been noticed and attested to by members of the action learning set (see Chapters 5 and 6).

#### **7.4.2 Process validity**

Reflecting from the perspective of process validity, the problem of toxicity is traced through all three cycles where the first attempt at reducing toxicity, enhancing values and improving personal and organisational wellness failed in cycle 1. Process validity raises the issue whether appropriate processes have been used in order to achieve the required outcome. If a desired outcome such as a reduction in toxicity is required then appropriate processes to achieve this outcome must be designed and put in place. In this study it was important to allow managers who were directly affected by the toxicity to find their voice and establishing an action learning set for example was an appropriate process for this to happen. Feeding back into that scenario the second cycle included the establishment of the action learning set, the utilisation of the drawing exercises with participants finding their voice through explaining what they had drawn validated my own personal experiences of toxicity as identified in the first cycle. The third cycle traced the action learning set's agency and initiatives in bringing about organisational change and improving the wellness for themselves and others through poster campaigns on values, creating safe spaces for conversations to change through deploying social networks as indicated in chapter 6. Precisely because of the cyclical nature of action research the lessons learned by myself as inside researcher and by the members of the action learning set gained momentum while moving through the cycles. These lessons helped create new knowledge concerning how the college experienced toxicity and how managers as victims of toxicity dealt with their trauma and stress. I have followed my methodological design, both in terms of the participatory paradigms and the non-positivist approach to research that underpins my action research study. The process of data generation, analysis of coded data and reporting is congruent with my methodological process. The way in which I established my action learning

set to meet equity requirements so that all races and genders were included in the study indicates my inclusive ontological position related to research requirements. I have maintained high ethical standards throughout the research process and used my own values as standards of judgement where I have self-regulated my behaviour and beliefs. The ontological standards and options that I used in Chapter 2 where I first grounded myself as a researcher and then as an HRD manager have guided my conduct throughout this study.

#### **7.4.3 Democratic validity**

When I reflect on Cycle 2 and 3 the participation and collaboration of the managers supplies evidence to meet the criteria for democratic validity. Democratic validity stresses the importance of ensuring that each member of the action learning set has a voice and is given equal opportunity to participate and that no one member dominates others within the group. Democratic validity ensures that all participants who are contributing to the project are acknowledged and have a right to their own take on the problem being investigated. The managers who were members of the action learning set brought a variety of perspectives on the extent of the toxicity. In addition they not only reflected on how they experienced toxicity in the workplace, but also on the way they coped with the stress and trauma as a result of toxic leaders, toxic followers and toxic systems. The drawing exercises assisted them in finding their voice, finding compassion and commonality within the set allowing them to identify the life enhancing values that were being denied. The action learning set's experiences in Cycle 2 and the employees who spoke out at the Critical Caring Conversation Café meetings highlighted the same values being denied as reflected in Cycle 3. This evidence is further validated by students and employees when they were striking as their placards highlighted the lack of values such as transparency (ANNEXURE). Through the participation of the managers the study is firmly entrenched in the local context of the college as reflected upon in Chapter 2. Thus the study has democratic validity which makes it relevant to its context.

#### **7.4.4 Catalytic validity**

When I reflect on my own personal changes in OD approaches, how I embraced Dialogic OD which is in stark contrast to what I did in Cycle 1 that was based on a strong diagnostic approach I am able to claim catalytic validity. Catalytic validity refers to the transformative nature of action research to bring about change as the process of engaging participants as change agents – for their own personal change as well as that of the organisation. Personally, I reoriented my views and assisted my action learning set members to find a way to deepen their understanding of their own plight by introducing them to the Toxic Triangle model discussed in Chapter 3. Their change in understanding, behaviour and practice did not come about overnight. The second cycle gave them time to find an identity as Curatio, strengthened by the

creation of a logo and the wearing of T shirts. Through their own reflection on the development of the project they were able to track their own development and articulate their experiences clearly when questioned. Meeting catalytic validity ensures educational learning and influence of the researcher and the participants has taken place and I believe the evidence I have supplied in the last two chapters is sufficient for me to acknowledge that I have changed my own thinking with regards to engaging in organisational development and practice and in addition that I have positively influenced the participants, as managers in their educational development and practice.

#### **7.4.5 Dialogic validity**

Turning now to dialogic validity which is the space created within the research process for all participants to engage and contribute within the project so that there can mutual learning and understanding in developing knowledge. By establishing an action learning set, a safe space was created for the co-creation of knowledge by cogeneration of data and joint analysis of what the data was portraying. I encouraged dialogue to take place within the action learning set by through the participatory approach used in drawing the collages and in listening to each other's narratives of their experiences of toxicity. In this participatory and inclusive way we learnt from each other. I can further claim to meet this criterion as I was fortunate to work with other students engaged in masters and doctoral studies and who were part of the National Research Fund (NRF) project of my supervisor. We met every month at the university and Skyped with other students who were in another site. This group became my validation group as I was able to present my work in progress and ask for critical comments. Changes to my writing and improvements in doing field work emerged from my learning from interacting with this participatory group of students, even although we were working on different topics, the processes were similar and to have fresh eyes critique my writing was rewarding and instructive. I also used two personal colleagues as critical friends. The one was a qualified psychologist working in industrial psychology and in the training environment while the other was a co-editor of a book we wrote together on a multi-faith approach to teaching religion and is an education consultant. Both were familiar with the college environment and could play the role of being the devil's advocate to stimulate my thinking, offer critique and encouragement. They acted as sounding boards when I dealt with matters that related to psychology and research methodology in the college context. Through dialogic validity the study contributes to the generation of new or expanded knowledge

I am acutely aware of the usefulness of Habermas' criteria for social validity (Habermas, 1979: 2) which comprises four elements. These four criteria relate to whether what is being communicated is; comprehensible, truthful, authentic and appropriate. McNiff (2016) correctly

states that by using these criteria, which are both social and communicative criteria, that it is possible to ascertain the capacity of the researcher to communicate effectively. By using these four criteria I am able to gauge whether my study has met the requirements of credibility and reliability (Sullivan, Roche & McDonagh, 2016:103). As I have engaged with my critical friends monthly during the field work period I have subjected my work and reflections to their scrutiny. Thus through dialogue I have shaped my communication both in content and form to make it understandable and comprehensible. I have further produced enough evidence through allowing participants to express themselves in art and verbally and to participate in the coding and analysis of data co-generated so as to ensure that what I am saying meets the criteria of truthfulness. The values that I espouse and have spelt out in chapter 2 have been open for all to see as I use them as my standards of judgement. I have shown a loving caring disposition that has been inclusive, participative, respectful, trustworthy and honest throughout the study. Where I have acted in a non-participatory way as reflected in the first cycle (chapter 5) I have acknowledged my downfall and made amends by forming an action learning set based on participatory principles. Finally, I have taken into consideration the cultural norms of the sector, the system within the sector that may have influenced the toxicity and how this study may have been influenced by the workplace culture. By being attentive and aware of these factors I have shown that my research meets the criteria of appropriateness.

### **7.5 Reflecting on the limitations of the study**

As I read over the chapters and reflect on the context of the college, the progress made, the influence I have had on my own health, and the influence I have had on the action learning set's wellbeing I also have to acknowledge the limitations of this study. One of the limitations of this study is that it focussed only on managers within the college context. I am aware from personal observations in the workplace of bullying and harassment from toxic leaders and mobbing from toxic followers (not only employees but from students as well) that the prevalence of toxicity permeates all sections of the college, both administrative and lecturing employees. It would have been an advantage to investigate and compare what strategies others employees utilise in order to deal with their emotional trauma.

Another limitation is that the research was confined to the Corporate Centre as the hub of activity where managers report to the SMT. While the research focused on the toxicity located in only one building it may be expected that in other areas of the college the toxic triangle may equally apply. Toxicity is not only found within top management, but throughout the organisation. Hence it can be expected that toxic leaders may emerge at other levels of management, such as heads of departments and office management. The limitation of the study to curtail the research to include only senior managers at the Corporate Centre was done on

financial grounds. By neglecting other leaders it is not known how other employees as non-managers cope with the toxicity in the college.

## **7.6 Reflecting on my contribution to knowledge**

By reflecting on my learning as an inside researcher, researching my own organisation as well as reflecting on the learning of the action learning set I believe that this account of my learning has contributed to knowledge in the following three areas:

- Expanding the approaches to methods of data generation (methodological contribution)
- Understanding toxicity, its prevalence and effects on managers in the TVET college sector (theoretical contribution)
- The development of a relationship model of organisational development that addresses toxicity and enhances wellness (theoretical and practice contribution)

### **7.6.1 Expanding the approaches to methods of data generation (methodological contribution)**

An important element of this study lies in the *approach used to co-create knowledge through data generation* by interviewing participants while they are grooming horses and through art by drawing two collages. While visual methods of data generation are used extensively in research I have yet to find evidence where it is used in research with managers in a TVET College in order to examine emotional trauma caused by toxicity. Visual methodology has been used extensively in organisation research (Bell, Warren & Schroeder, 2014) The purpose of using this visual method was to co-create (Willis, 2016:389) and cogenerate data of the emotional kind in nonintrusive, caring ways, through a double dissociation. I was creating a space where data could be generated with participants who could through drawing dissociate from the actual emotional traumatic event and thus lessen the impact upon reflecting on painful experiences. By allowing them to speak to their drawings that depicted the traumatic events I created a double dissociation so as to diminish the energy and negative power that is attached to traumatic experiences. Hence, the method was chosen for its caring, ethical attributes in order to make it easy for participants to speak about workplace-induced trauma. I used the same strategy when interviewing managers while they groomed horses. The horses were a distraction to lessen the emotions that may have been evoked if I had asked the participants to dig deep into emotional baggage they carried as a result of the trauma experienced in the workplace. The participants who were interviewed were able to dissociate from the source of their trauma through grooming the horses that gave them something to concentrate on while recalling their experiences. The importance of this contribution is that I used novel approaches in order to facilitate participants to get in touch with their feelings which due to their coping strategy they had suppressed and did not talk about easily. Members of the action learning set

found that by being engaged in these activities they had a sense of freedom to express deep seated emotions in a non-threatening way. Not only is this approach new to research in the TVET sector but in research on wellness in organisational development as I have not come across it in the literature that I have read in the South African context.

### ***7.6.2 Understanding toxicity, its prevalence and effects on managers in the TVET College sector (theoretical contribution)***

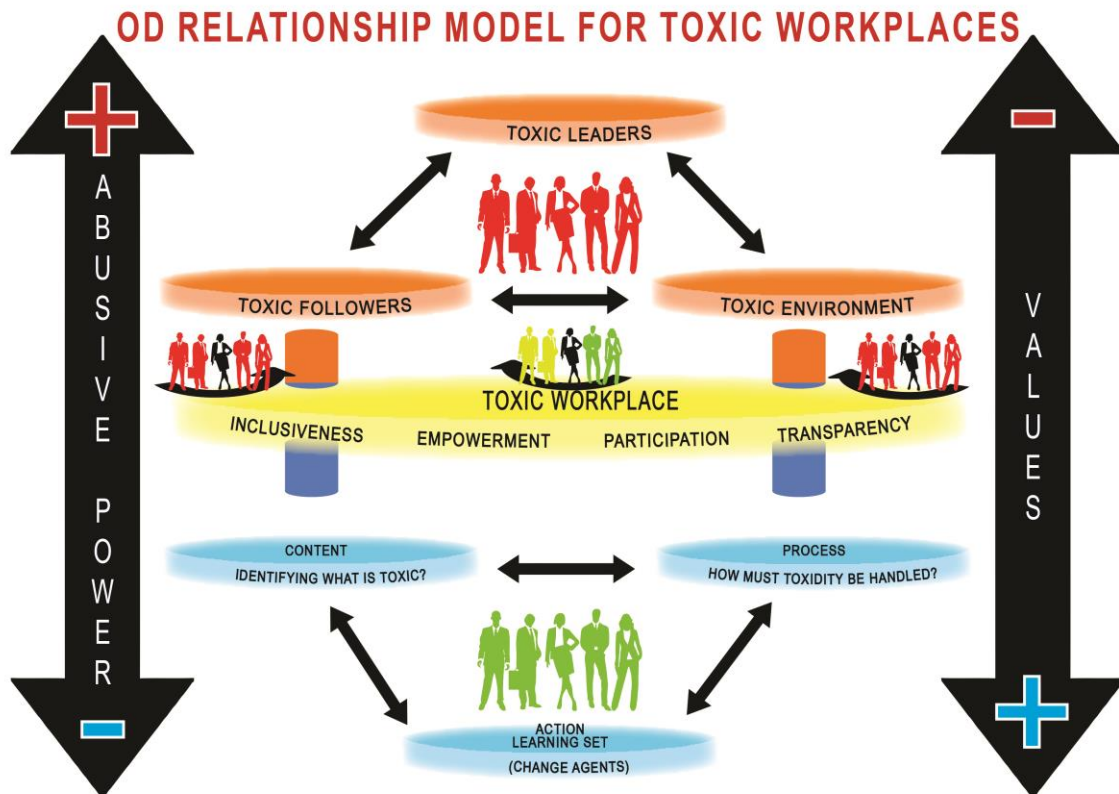
The second area wherein I believe I have made a contribution to knowledge lies in expanding the theoretical knowledge of the extent of toxicity in a TVET college and how managers try to cope with the toxicity, in the college workplace. No study has been conducted thus far on this aspect of colleges in the TVET sector. Having re-checked in 2016 the research databases of dissertations and theses for the TVET College sector in South Africa there is no research that addresses organisational development and the wellness of managers *vis a vis* emotional toxicity that exists in colleges. The closest research addresses psychological violence (Meyer, 2011), the effect of mergers on psychological contracts (De Wet, 2008), and stress and wellness (Ceridwen, 2005). Hence, my claim is that this study starts to close the gap on understanding the TVET sector better by gaining insight into the college as an organisation, the plight of managers having to cope with toxic leaders, toxic followers and toxic environments as well as their coping strategies pertaining to their own health and wellness and that of their colleagues. . I have demonstrated that by allowing managers to live out their life enhancing values of trust, participation, inclusiveness, collaboration and empowerment, communication is improved. They are also better able to take responsibility for and manage their own wellness and influence others to improve their practice. By engaging in aspects of dialogic OD, they have created a climate to change conversations about the organisation and in so doing there has been organisational change. This contribution to knowledge of the sector should be of interest to the Department of Higher Education (DHET) as it offers insights into the stress and trauma experienced by managers in colleges and may help to reduce absenteeism, promote a positive workforce, improve productivity and reduce financial expenditure as a result of leave days taken due to the toxicity and its affect upon the health of employees.

This study has further contributed to the knowledge of college management in the TVET sector by highlighting the prevalence of toxicity in the college. I have shown the negative psychological and physical effects it has had on the managers health, my own health and that of my colleagues in the action learning set (chapters 6 and 7) and have unearthed some of the negative ways managers deal with emotional trauma in the workplace. On a positive note it has also shown that change is possible through the embodiment of life-enhancing values, enabling the organisation to become a value-driven organisation and that and that managers have the

capacity to take responsibility and change their own environments. The research has shown how managers react to toxicity in a more positive way now, after being part of Cycle 2 and 3 in this action research project by being more assertive, relying on support from each other, being more participatory, acknowledging others and including them in decision making processes, letting go of negative elements that they cannot change and for which they are not responsible. This study has also highlighted the fact that life-enhancing values contribute to positive communication patterns in the workplace. When these same values are denied, communication is negatively affected resulting in the toxic triangle taking root within the organisation. Managers are resourceful, talented and capable when trusted and want to improve their own practice and influence others to improve their practices.

### ***7.6.3 The development of a relationship model of organisational development that addresses toxicity and enhances wellness (theoretical and practical contribution)***

The third area of knowledge contribution lies in the fact that this study has deepened the understanding of how organisational development can take place in a toxic TVET college through the use of Dialogic OD approaches as described in Chapter 3 to change the conversations to bring about organisational development. Dialogic OD practised from a values-based approach assists in countering the negative psychological and physical effects of the toxic triangle, leading to improved personal and organisational wellness I have developed a relationship model to explain how toxicity can be addressed using the theories discussed in chapter 3 (See Figure 7.1 below).



**Figure 7.1 OD Relationship model for doing organisational development within a toxic workplace**

The Model in Fig 7.1 above draws on the principles of chaos and complexity theory which entails that employees within in an organisation form a maze of networks, interconnected and influencing each other. The mutual influence is relational and communicative, so that that the content of communication (what is being said) as well as the form of the content (the way in which it is being said) as well as the energy, (conveying the content), is linked to the interpersonal relationships between employees. Chaos theory contributes to our understanding of organisational interpersonal relationships in that it informs us that relationship patterns function within webs of connections that change suddenly at random and in unpredictable fashion. The process is impossible to control and hence we cannot manage change. Using this insight from chaos and complexity theory I have realised that organisational change rests on two components; people and communication. These two components cannot be separated. What binds us together as employees is communication, both verbal and nonverbal forms. What we can do as managers in organisational development, is to influence the relationships through content, form and energy. The influence for change is facilitated through creating the communicative space between employees for conversations to take place and this in turn moves them towards living out life-enhancing values. When there is no space created for change to happen, for dialogue to happen and conversations to change and when values are

not embodied in everyday interaction, the toxic triangle takes root and negatively affects personal and organisational wellness.

From my learning in this study, I have developed the relationship model of organisational development as an expression of my living theory of organisational development in a college which is experiencing toxicity. I refer to it as a relationship model because firstly, organisations are made up of people who are part of a complex system of interpersonal relationships. Secondly, what cements relationships together is communication, through language, words symbols and expressions. What Dialogic Organisation attempts to do is to bring about a change of conversations that will in turn change the relationships within an organisation. I make no claim that this is the only model that will influence organisational development and contribute to personal and organisational wellness as it is bound both to time and context. It is relevant for the college now but in a year or two may not be, nor may it be relevant in another college.

I now want to explain the model in more detail and would advise that the video of Professor Budd, that I used to explain chaos theory to my action learning set in Chapter 6 (Video clip 5.4 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPbExSYcQgY>) be revisited again so that the random swinging of the double pendulum (clockwise or anti-clockwise) is understood as acts of assumed randomness or chaos. In the above model the central disc, represents the workplace - the locus of toxicity that I referred to previously as the crucible wherein toxicity takes form and is experienced. The desired values, such as transparency, inclusiveness, empowerment and participation on which a thriving organisation is built are identified on the rim of the disc. The disc (workplace) can slide up or down on the two pillars that run through the left and right hand sides. Projecting out of that workplace the toxic triangle made up of toxic leaders, toxic followers and toxic systems can be identified. Although it is part and parcel of the normal workplace I have separated the triangle for ease of explanation. The colour of the toxic triangle circles are shown as strong orange noting its danger to the organisation. The two pillars upon which the workplace can gravitate up or down change colour as it moves downwards to what can be identified as a second inverted wellness triangle that has three elements, namely, the action learning set as change agents, the identified content of toxicity and finally the processes of handling toxicity based on agreed values. The colour of the circles in the triangle are blue showing a coolness, a pleasant alternative to the hot dangerous circles in the toxic triangle. The dynamics of the organisation is identified by the three groupings of employees on the workplace floor. In the workplace two groups of employees have arrows indicating that they have a group relationship due to the spinning of the double pendulum in a clock wise manner. It could have been ten or twenty- the number of groups is irrelevant. The fact that in any organisation groups or cliques form is explained by these attractors taking shape.

The energy that the spinning brings about feeds an attractor so that a spontaneous group emerges that is self-reliant and self-supporting. There is another group that also emerged shown by the anti-clock movement of the arrow. This group emerges due to an attractor, unpredictable, sudden and self-organising. In all of the circles the people have been coloured and appear in the toxic as well as in the wellness triangle. By doing this I draw attention to the fact that it is people in relationships that are: a. toxic, b. change agents or c. neutral not wanting change and prepared to allow the status quo to continue due to fear. Due to the fact that the workplace oscillates up and down on the two pillars helps in understanding that as the workplace moves up closer to the toxic triangle there is an increase in the negative effects of toxicity. As the workplace moves downwards to the wellness triangle the negative effects of toxicity is reduced. This helps to explain that toxicity can never be removed in its entirety from the work place, but it can be reduced by identifying what is toxic and following processes to overcome the toxicity, which in this case were driven by the managers who made up the action learning set.

On either side of the model are two vertical arrows that can help gauge two things. Firstly, the left hand arrow gauges the abuse of power element. As the workplace moves up towards the toxic triangle the abuse of power increases as the workplace moves downwards the abuse of power is nullified and the employees are empowered. Likewise on the right hand side the arrow depicts the decrease of life-enhancing values that are denied by toxic leaders and followers as the workplace moves upwards. The life-enhancing values of inclusiveness, participation, empowerment, and trust increase as the workplace moves downwards towards the wellness triangle.

Doing organisational development within a toxic organisation is both a skill and an art as the HRD manager orchestrates the journey of the workplace up and down the two pillars. Again chaos theory helps in explaining that the change agents are operating at the tipping point, living on the edge of chaos as they influence the movement of the workplace. If the HRD manager does nothing to curb the upward movement of the workplace towards the toxic triangle, employees will suffer physical, emotional and spiritual abuse as per the anthropological eco-systemic model that I adopted in chapter 3. The abuse of power will have free flow; however if the workplace moves too far downwards to the wellness triangle the possibility is that the employees might have too much power resulting in anarchy that is also counterproductive to wellness. Thus the HRD Manager is instrumental in keeping the balance. How is this achieved? In the centre disc – the workplace, there is an opportunity to change the toxic work place by creating containers which are safe spaces for conversations to take place, such as Facebook

and other social media such as Whatup for expression of thoughts and dialogues to emerge. Another useful safe space is using Openspace Technologies' cafés as places for open dialogue amongst all employees to participate in the process of talking with each other. As I did in this study, the HRD manager should enrol others to help him attain this balance. The aim of the change agents is to identify common acceptable values and find ways of orchestrating change in conversations that support, foster and drive organisational development

### **7.7 Reflecting on the significance of my study for my practice for others, and the college sector**

I have come to realise how much I have gained personally from the study. I had maintained that organisational development starts with the individual employee. My research question from chapter 1; is "How do I improve my practice and influence those that I work with to improve their practice, so as to bring about personal and institutional healing from the current climate of toxicity which is experienced every day?" and in Chapter 2 I grounded myself in the study as an inside researcher conducting research in my own organisation where I foregrounded myself in the self-study. The emphasis that I alluded to above, namely that of my research question and the foregrounding of myself places me in a strong position to reflect on whether there has been any personal change. Epistemologically I am now able to contend that I know what I know and how I have come to know what I know. My knowledge as an HRD manager pertaining to organisational development and change was tied to the literature and my approach was fuelled by a diagnostic approach which in turn was centred in the idea of the consultant expert following a positivist paradigm. My approach to dealing with organisations was tied to a humanist biological systems approach very much like a medical doctor examining the symptoms of the patient, diagnosing the cause and effect, deciding on a programme of action, prescribing the required medication and monitoring the outcome. I now know from experience (Cycle1 as outlined in Chapter 5) that this does not work.

What I do know from experience is that as an HRD manager change is brought about with the help of others and from the bottom up. There must be collaboration, participation, empowerment, inclusiveness of others within a framework of mutual trust that unearths the real issues – what matters to other as well as what matters to me and within a participatory paradigm such as action research find ways and means of naming the problem/s and finding through action research cycles means of improving the situation (Cycles 2 and 3 as recorded in Chapter 5 and 6 deal extensively with the learning gained by myself and the other members of the action learning set concerning change).

When I reflect upon the significance of the study for *managers* in the college and perhaps in other TVET colleges as well I am able to note that the significance rests in a number of areas. Firstly, it is learning to identify what emotional toxicity is, understand what effects it has upon health and how to use personal strategies to deal with it by taking personal responsibility. Secondly, the action learning set managers were able to influence others to improve their practice by enhancing values through advocacy campaigns such as the values poster campaigns and creating space for dialogues about toxicity, wellness and change to take place by changing conversations through slogans using social media (Cycle 3) reflected upon in more detail in Chapter 6. Thirdly, I have noticed that there has been personal growth and development. Managers have become more responsible for their practice, not waiting to be told or waiting for the approval of senior management on what and how to do things on campus. They have also become more assertive in their management style. This does not mean that they have become arrogant, but rather that they are supporting and consulting each other which makes taking decisions easier. Their learning and personal change is recorded in chapter 6. .

The significance of this study for the *college* is that through the dialogic OD activities like the Critical Caring Conversation Cafés (Chapter 5) which gives expression to Open Space Technology (Owen, 2008) the issues of values, wellness, and communication are placed within the work arena for debate and input. Testimony to the success and change that has taken place has been noted in Chapter 6, where managers' appreciated system changes within the college so that we now have quarterly staff meetings, managers are given more freedom to manage and meetings are scheduled giving opportunities for reporting to take place in a professional manner where issues were tabled and dealt with effectively. These changes are as a result of the study influencing top management to listen to the needs of the employees and adapt their leadership style to be more inclusive. The system changes have been alluded to in Chapter 5 and 6. The Corporate Centre wellness committee has also been energised and has organised Heritage Day celebration offering a meal where all cultural dishes were served to employees at the Corporate Centre. In addition they organised a Woman's Day activity with a motivational speaker and the college employees have participated by playing soccer and netball in a Government inter-departmental sports even. This study has placed a focus back on staff wellness through the values poster campaign and the café's. The conversations are starting to change and for sustained change to take place top management must facilitate space for the dialogues to continue and tweak adjustments as they listen to how employees perceive the change they college needs. At this stage of the study it is difficult for me to determine how the change will roll out as I have learnt through this study that nothing is predictable, at best there is only an inkling as to the direction the college is heading.

As I reflect on the significance of this project for the broader *TVET and education sector* and try to understand its possible application for other colleges and educational institutions, I am in a position to record that what I have done at the college has had a ripple effect in the broader education community. As an HRD Manager I have recently been approached by the regional office of the Provincial Department of Basic Education to support a school that was experiencing conflict between the staff and principal resulting in a degree of toxicity being experienced in the workplace. I was given a list of 25 grievances lodged by staff. In the past I would have taken each grievance and tried to address it, but due to my learning in this study, I changed my approach. At a *bosberaad*<sup>24</sup> lasting over four hours staff drew a collage of their negative experiences and then did a second one later of their dreams and hopes for the school. I explained the toxic triangle model and how dialogic organisational development is useful in changing conversations and bringing about change and how it can make a difference in school systems. The success of this exercise in helping to change attitudes and beliefs and to address toxicity at the school is reflected in this email which I received from a staff member.

*“All I could say is that there were educators who won’t open up easy, but that day they came forward telling their stories. We also had to draw positive things afterwards. It was like something heavy was lifted from our shoulders. It was just easy to talk after the collage. For me it felt like it must not stop. You felt lifted, few of my colleagues also said they would never have dreamt of opening up and say what her drawing meant, how they felt. This was really successful and we were taught a lot. A great idea of getting people to open up”.* (SF Email 10 Sept 2016<sup>25</sup>)

It thus appears that the strategies and process I followed in the college can be adapted successfully for other contexts, such as schools This has real significance for the TVET sector as many other colleges are also experiencing toxicity in the workplace and at the moment the Department of Higher Education does not have the capacity or the funds to engage in formal consultant- based processes of organisational development. What this approach offers is a cost effective way of improving the work climate and offering strategies of coping with the effects of being subject to a toxic workplace by changing conversations. Colleges could take the learning from this study and customise their own programme to address toxicity and bring about improved wellness and entrench a values based workplace within the sector.

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<sup>24</sup> A *bosberaad* is an Afrikaans word that is used for a gathering of people that normally would take place away from the institution in a venue in a natural habitat in order to plan and discuss sensitive issues. An equivalent would be to speak of a retreat.

<sup>25</sup> In the code SF Email 10 Sept 2016 SF refers to the name of the person who sent the email.

## 7.8 Reflecting on the impact, sustainability and further areas for research.

Before I reach the conclusion I want to highlight the *impact and sustainability* that this study has had on the college and how changing conversations ignites new thinking and action. The momentum for change is seen in employees taking on new roles and sustaining a movement. The Corporate Centre established a Wellness Committee after the field work of this study had been completed that has been very active in the past 3 months running a Woman's Day event to promote the role of women in the workplace, a Cultural Day event to support diversity in the workplace, a Breast Cancer Awareness event to support employees who have cancer, or are cancer survivors (two of the campuses immediately followed with their own event that included a short video interview with one of our own survivors), and finally a men's event to encourage men to relax and enjoy each other's company. Evidence of these activities are captured in the photos below.

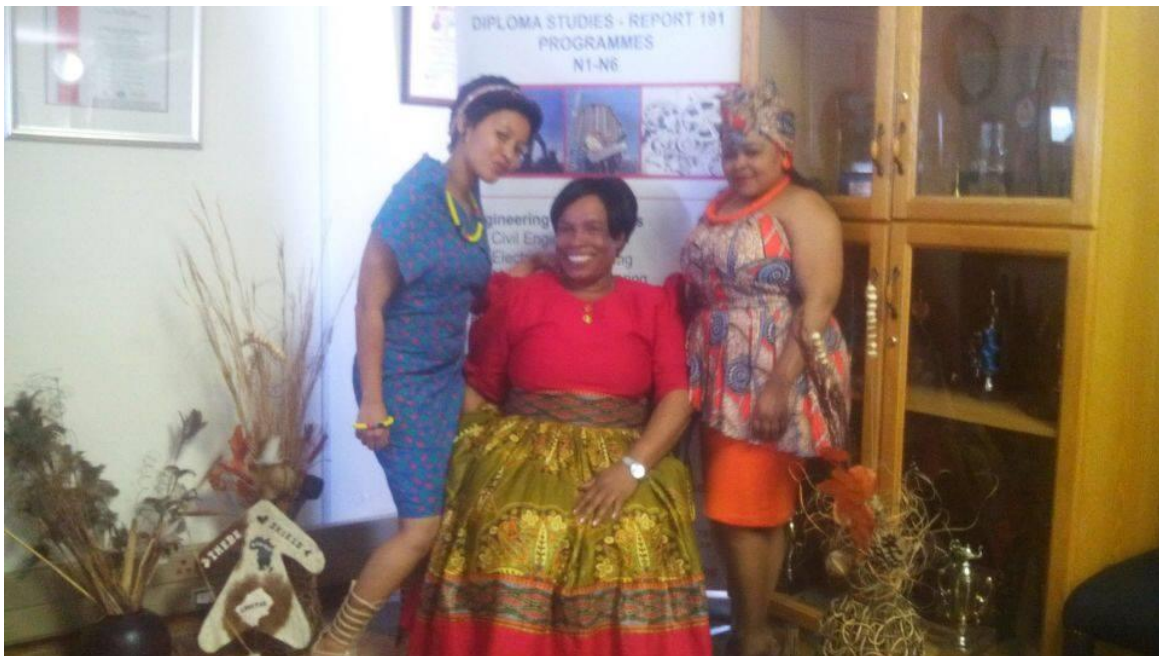


Figure 7.2. Ladies at Cultural Day Celebrations displaying different cultural dresses.



Figure 7.3 Employees wearing pink in support of breast cancer awareness day at a wellness function



Figure 7.4 Employees watching a video interview of a colleague who is a cancer survivor at the cancer awareness event



**Figure 7.5 Male employees being catered for at a men's relaxation wellness event**

One example of the *sustainability* of change is attested to by the fact that when I was at a conference for a few days, one of the action learning set members phoned me to find out where I was as he thought I may be sick. He had not seen me at work for three days and he was concerned about me. This would not have happened if he had not participated in the action learning set as I had often been away and had previously never had such a phone call. This act of caring and support is evidence that the values approach that I used in doing dialogic organisational development has become entrenched, and employees are starting to live out their live-enhancing values.

*Future areas for research* stemming from the contributions made through conversations, collages, drawings and video journals by the action learning set during this study have emerged. A number of questions arose that may become areas for future research projects. These questions are:

- To what extent do union activities such as strikes, negotiating strategies and protests qualify as mobbing and where would that behaviour fall in terms of the toxic triangle model?
- What strategies can be used to ensure that South African labour law speaks directly, concretely and legislatively against toxic behaviour in the workplace?
- What influence does leadership have on the toxic triangle model that would reduce the toxicity experienced in colleges?
- Can the relationship OD model developed in this study be implemented in other TVET colleges and to what extent would it be effective in reducing toxicity and improving employees' wellness

I am a firm believer in the role and place of organised labour within the workplace. However, it appears that some behaviours of union members may be bordering on mobbing as per the literature that defines mobbing. The fear factor of not towing union lines may have a negative effect on an employee's wellness and this practice needs to be researched to understand the emotional trauma linked to strikes and pressurising management to make decisions that are not always in line with policy and legislation. In defence of unions it may well be argued that their strategies to fight for their organisational rights are justified teleological so that the end justifies the means. In Chapter 5 and 6 managers indicated the effect that strikes had upon their wellness while drawing the first collage and then again by referring to their own learning on how they dealt with stress. Another angle to this debate on some union representatives' behaviour is that their behaviour may be as a result of weak leadership who have taught union representatives to act in a toxic way rather than the behaviour being the norm of union members.

As an extension of the core of the above question, is whether union members engage in mobbing, either as toxic leaders within the union or as toxic followers would be curtailed if the labour laws in South Africa were amended. This second area of research as to what can be done from a legislative perspective flowed out of discussions with some members of the action learning set as it seemed in my college that top leadership in the college and the Department of Higher Education were rendered powerless by union activity. Linked to this question for future research is whether having a stronger legislative labour position would make any difference as managers may be too afraid of applying the legislation.

I have already alluded to the question of leadership in the above paragraphs but a further area for research is focussed on leadership within a toxic environment. The style of leadership, the role of leadership and the sphere of leadership within toxic colleges needs investigation.

From the exercise of drawing up the SWOT analysis of the Corporate Centre one common weakness identified by all who participated was that the College has weak leadership in the SMT. Padilla's toxic triangle model's three elements of toxic leaders, susceptible follower's conducive environments are seen as interacting elements that hold the triangle together that is accountable for the toxicity within an organisation (Chapter 3). The question arises as to whether within the college context the toxicity is solely as a result of the weak leadership. Would the toxicity have been reduced with stronger leadership and more decisive management or were the SMT also victims within the Higher Education sector and hence the problem is more complex and systemic in nature than supposed?

This study was not designed to research these questions, nor was there any attempt to engage with the literature around these and related topics. However, during the study and in discussions with participants and questioning myself as to the toxicity that the college has had to endure, I was constantly brought back to ponder whether the college would have been any better in terms of wellness with stronger leaders, more professional union members and what labour legislation amendments would protect the victims of narcissistic personalities and support HR in ensuring wellness in the workplace. I hope other researchers will be prompted to research these areas which are outside the scope of this study.

As I reflect on the study, my learning as an HRD Manager and that of the action learning set, I am hesitant to make any recommendations. This is not because we have not learnt, but rather for two reasons. Firstly one is a paradigmatic reason, namely that in my paradigm choices I have chosen to undertake an action research project in order to produce an explanation of my living theory, nobody else's lived theory. Hence what is good for me, makes sense to me and for which I am responsible as I make public my educational influence and improved practice may not work for others in their context. Therefore for me to make recommendations on how to tackle organisational development is presumptuous and borders on arrogance. My living theory is tied to my understanding of organisational development, to my personality, to my competencies and choices as an HRD Manager. What works for me does not imply that it will work exactly the same for everyone. Hence I am hesitant to make recommendations on how to do organisational development that will improve wellness within an organisation.

Secondly, I have opted to work from a theoretical basis of complexity and chaos theory. From this stand point I may interpret the world very differently from other HRD managers. Having embraced complexity and chaos theories as lenses through which to see the world and organisations I am disciplined in my approach and study to remain faithful to my theoretical choices. Working from complexity and chaos theories reinforces my paradigmatic reason in the previous paragraph. Organisations are too complex to make recommendations. What works in one college might not necessary work in another, hence there is no room for generalisations. The proliferation of networks, people, ideas, and relationships within an expanding organisation such as the college increases the complexity of the organisation. Coupled with the complexity of relationships within the organisation there is the elements of unpredictability and randomness. Change happens so unexpectedly and rapidly as attractors such as cliques within the organisation, gather energy and momentum that there is little by way of stability. To make any recommendation in such an organisation or to expect recommendations to be applied within similar chaotic environments is ludicrous. Hence, from both a paradigmatic position and a theoretical position I leave it to HRD managers to use the concepts, and theories supporting

values-driven organisations and dialectic organisational development that are most relevant for their context in order to engage in organisational development.

## **7.9 Concluding remarks**

As I conclude this study I understand my three years of engaging in the 3Rs; reading, research and reporting - as being a journey. This journey like all journeys is characterised by twists and turns, ups and downs. Some chapters were like travelling on the highway with double carriage ways, well sign posted and relatively safe and easy to travel, both in terms of time and speed. Chapters, 2, 3, 5 and 7 fall into this category. The more I reflected on why this may be the case it becomes more clear that the moment I had to deal with my own context as in Chapter Two where I grounded myself in the study and teased out the context of the study, I moved quickly as I am immersed in the facts. Chapter 3 where I highlighted my theoretical choices and positions would always be easy for me as I love engaging in theoretical discussions and I believe it is part of my mind-set having done systematic theology that is steeped in theoretical arguments and expressions. Chapters 5 and 7 were relatively easy to traverse as I was reporting on my learning and improved practice and a summary of the entire work undertaken in this last chapter. Chapter 1 was like driving at night in the mist, uphill not knowing what lay ahead. I had a map, I had the vehicle, I was eager to start the journey, but I found the pace slow due to not having written academically for more than twelve years. The lack of confidence played a role in slowing down my progress as I had self-doubt as to whether I could write or not. Chapter 6 on the other hand was like travelling through a built up suburban area where every street seemed the same. I found it difficult to separate and correctly place the data in a flowing sequence that made logical sense. Fortunately, after numerous attempts and rearranging the content I exited from the urban area for the lush countryside in Chapter 7.

Some of the dips and twists that had to be negotiated as I travelled through the TVET landscape was a delay caused by ill health, three operations in a month and the effects of chemotherapy which affected my fingers, slowing down the typing process over a period of four months. At times I was scaling the highlands admiring the view of the research, excited about the formation of the action learning set and the participatory approach to data generation and noticing the improvement in the set's managers to handle their own wellness as they became more assertive and took responsibility for their own actions. There were occasions where I was happy to be out on the open road doing field work. However, there were other times where I was busy in the marshy lowlands, stuck in the mud needing assistance to get back on the road again. Some of the wicked problems emerged at these times, such as when I was ostracised for trying to implement values in the college and did not know how best to deal with my own dented ego and the relationships that soured between myself and my colleagues within the Corporate

Centre. There were traumatic times where as an inside researcher I had to maintain the balance between being a manager, a researcher, a counsellor and confidant simultaneously. Dealing with the abuse of power, listening to victims and witness bullying and mobbing from toxic leaders and toxic followers was energy sapping that made me feel, mentally, emotionally and physically tired and exhausted. I now understood through first hand experiences what Frost and Robinson (1998) had warned about as the plight of toxic handlers who are heroes and casualties in the organisation. The journey often stretched into the early hours of the morning where there is less traffic and the only accompaniment is the darkness surrounding the light of the desk lamp and computer as my wife has long gone to bed. On other occasions before the break of day I have been travelling, pushing on to reach the next town and keep up with deadlines. I learnt during the journey that these unusual hours are part and parcel with the task of being a researcher and completing a thesis.

Like all journeys mechanical problems are bound to arise and hold up the journey. In my case a crashed computer with hardware and intermittent internet connections were experienced but having back up plans and learning to juggle activities did not stop my journey. Along the road it is not unusual to pick up passengers, make new friends, and form connections with people of note. Two of these new friends have been Jean McNiff and Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt who offered a number of workshops on action research at my university as part of a student development programme. They are world-acclaimed academic action research researchers with a wealth of knowledge and have contributed to my learning during the journey, being excellent mentors and navigators making me aware of alternative routes, pit falls on the road to success and possible roadblocks that would have halted or derailed my studies. As I travelled from town to town on my academic journey I was able to rely on the information centres located in these many towns. These centres were managed effectively by the same person that promotes this thesis. The information centre manager contained a wealth of knowledge and experience that guided my study and offered the best scenic routes available and made the journey an enriching experience.

I started my journey through the TVET landscape in winter dealing with the cold and stark workplace, where employees seemed to hibernate to get away from the cold demoralising weather associated with a toxic climate. The negative effect of the winter weather on wellness was evident from the sights and graffiti that I was seeing as I travelled along the dusty roads and rocky pathways of the college's employees' lives. However, spring is just around the corner as I come to the end of this journey. I am becoming aware that the change that is needed to reduce toxicity is starting to speckle the landscape. The possibilities exist for growth, the change in colour and shape of the landscape is becoming noticeable as was reflected in the second

collage with drawings of trees and colourful flowers. The warmth of the summer sun, the increased responsible activity of managers, the change of landscape structures and systems indicate the changes that are taking place within the organisation. There is a move by managers to nurture the flowers of life enhancing values such as participation, inclusiveness, trust, consultation, collaboration, empowerment that give colour to a healthy garden. As this journey has run its course in this early spring I can finally hear new sounds of birds calling to each other, chitter chatting and squawking indicating the change in conversations that will like dialogic organisational development bring about change within the organisation leading to employees experiencing improved health and wellness.

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# ANNEXURE A

## Permission Request.

### Note I have Removed logo for ethical reasons

Corporate Centre

13 February 2013

The Principal  
██████████ FET College  
8 Bram Fischer St  
Kleinfedorp  
2570

Dear Dr M D Mochwanaesi,

#### PERMISSION REQUEST TO UNDERTAKE PHD RESEARCH

I hereby request written permission to undertake research in ██████████ FET College with a cohort of Corporate Centre staff and Campus Managers who are included as middle managers at ██████████ FET College reporting directly to the principal at the Corporate Centre.

I am the HRD Manager at ██████████ Corporate Centre and am registered at North West University (Potchefstroom Campus) for a Doctorate in Philosophy in the Faculty of Education Sciences. I plan to do Action Research from the stand point of a Living Theory approach. My tentative topic is: Toxicity in the workplace: my living theory of organizational development. My promoter is Professor Lesley Wood an expert in the field of Action Research. Organizational Development is one of my KRA's and my research will support my function as an HRD Manager.

I plan to use qualitative research methods to gather data through Communities of Practice, possible focus groups and interviews. I would appreciate it if you could issue me with a permission letter to do the research. A supporting letter from my promoter is forthcoming.

Thank you.



Rod R Waddington

## ANNEXURE B

Permission granted for research.

Note I have removed logo for ethical reasons.

### MEMO

TO : MANAGERS AT CC & CAMPUSES  
CC : ALL UNIONS, COUNCIL & SMT  
FROM : PRINCIPAL  
DATE : 14 FEBRUARY 2013  
SUBJECT : ROD WADDINGTON RESEARCH

Permission is hereby granted to Mr. RR Waddington to conduct research at [REDACTED] FE College. Mr Waddington is a registered student at the North West University (Potchefstroom Campus) for a PhD in Organizational Development.

He is engaged in a unique genre of Action Research, namely a Living Theories approach. His topic is: Toxicity in the workplace: My living theory of organizational development using values based practice.

You are requested to give Mr. Waddington the necessary support as this study will be beneficial for the college. Please bring the contents of this communiqué to the attention of all staff members.

Kind regards

MD MOCHWANAESI (DR)  
PRINCIPAL

## **ANNEXURE C**

**Participants: Informed Consent. (Name of college removed for ethical reasons).**



NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY <sup>®</sup>  
YUNIBESITI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA  
NOORDWES-UNIVERSITEIT  
POTCHEFSTROOM CAMPUS

**Private Bag X 6001,  
Potchefstroom  
South Africa, 2520**

**Prof. L. Wood  
Faculty of Education Science:  
Research  
Tel: 018 299 4770  
E-mail: Lesley.wood@nwu.ac.za**

**Rod Waddington  
TVET College  
Tel. 018 406 7808  
E-mail rod@college.co.za**

### **LETTER OF CONSENT**

**Ethics no: NWU-00022-13-S2**

#### **WRITTEN CONSENT LETTER**

Dear Participant,

I am a registered PhD student at the North West University (Potchefstroom Campus) and plan to conduct the following participative action research at FET College's Corporate Centre, namely:

How do I contribute to enhancing personal and corporate values to reduce toxicity in a Further Education and Training environment: a living theory of organisational development.

I request that you read through the information below to inform yourself, before attaching your signature to this consent form.

Toxicity in the workplace involves three elements, namely toxic leaders, toxic followers (sometimes referred to as susceptible followers) and toxic environments (Frost, 2003, 2004, Goldman, 2009, Padilla 2007). This tripartite relationship is referred to as the toxic triangle by Padilla. The effect of this type of toxicity in the workplace is well documented in the literature and has been raised in the research done by Meyer in the FET College context. At the heart of toxicity is pain. Toxicity in the workplace is felt when feelings of dissonance - emotionally and cognitively, stress, feeling hurt, feelings of being unable to live out one's values, feelings

of hopelessness become daily occurrences. This study is aimed at bringing about healing to individuals and to the organization as an institution.

Healing is not the absence of toxicity; it goes beyond that, to creating a fulfilling workplace, where social capital plays a positive role by contributing to the individual well-being and development as well as to the effective organizational functioning.

The wellness of staff is a growing concern internationally, as employees become aware of their rights and the obligation of employers towards their staff. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), to whom the Republic of South Africa are signatories, both declare in their definition of occupational health the physical, mental and social wellbeing of workers. The King 111 Report highlights the importance of ethical leadership. Organizations are obliged to ensure ethical leadership that is values-based. Emotional toxicity is a violation, a denial and a negation of values.

Toxicity in the workplace has a negative effect foremost upon the health of staff members and secondly on the effectiveness and productivity of the institution. Both these factors cost individuals and the institution in term of money and time. What happens at the Corporate Centre as the hub of the institution has a cascading effect into the lives of others at campus level and even into the lives of staff member's families.

The question that this research addresses is: How can I as the HRD manager, contribute to and influence the creation of a healthier climate in the Corporate Centre of this college

Further question such as what supports, hinders, or sabotages organizational development may arise during the cyclical research process. Answers may emerge as to the degree of toxicity in the college, the effect of this toxicity on the health of colleagues and managers and what participatory strategies have a positive influence on reducing toxicity. The identification of core values through a participatory approach will be identified that will drive change within the organization and mechanisms found to install these values as habits through mindfulness.

The research methodology that I have chosen in order to produce a living theory of organizational development is action research. Action research requires identifying real problem/s and through cyclical planning, implementing and reflecting using a participatory approach to change, enhance and co-create an improved outcome.

In order to generate data your written consent is requested. Participation is absolutely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time without stating any reasons. Your contribution to this study will be acknowledged. You will be required to participate in a monthly process, keep documents, and maintain a weekly journal. Your contribution will be kept confidential. Data generation may include questionnaires, photo voice, multimedia (audio video recordings), and group drawings.

Thank you for your anticipated participation.

I have read the above and have been briefed on the research project. I hereby give my written consent to be included in this research as a participant.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant (name and signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Rod R Waddington

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



**ANNEXURE E**  
**Editor's declaration.**

**ANTHONY SPARG**

**Language practitioner**

*MA cum laude in African Languages (isiXhosa), MA cum laude in Linguistics*

*Language editing, isiXhosa-to-English and Afrikaans-to-English translation, and transcription*

14 Nahoon Valley Place  
Nahoon Valley  
East London, 5241  
South Africa  
Tel: +27 43 735 4397  
Cell: +27 79 106 8179  
Email: [p.a.sparg@telkomsa.net](mailto:p.a.sparg@telkomsa.net)

31 December 2016

To whom it may concern

**LANGUAGE EDITING DECLARATION**

I, Anthony Edward Sparg, language practitioner, hereby declare that I undertook language editing of the PhD thesis titled "Reducing organisational toxicity in an FET environment: a living theory of organisational development" for Rod Waddington.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely



.....  
Anthony Edward Sparg

**ANNEXURE F**

Form for Values handed out at workshop.

**MY VALUES - OUR VALUES - COLLEGE'S VALUES**

	People I admire most:	Why do you admire them?	What are the values they most display that draw me to them
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

	10 values I hold dear	Prioritise them	How much value do they have 1-10 (10 being the highest) for me.
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

6			
7			
8			
9			
10			

	Top 3 – 5 Values	Rate yourself on living these at work 1-5 5 being always live this value
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

## **ANNEXURE G**

**Presentaton at Education Association of South Africa (EASA) Golden Gate  
12-15 January 2013.**



### **The Challenges and Successes of Participatory Action Research for Community Engagement: Perspectives of Tertiary Participants**

Prof L Wood, Dr AJ Greyling, Ms M Kok,  
Ms A Seobi, Mr R Waddington, Ms R Selthare-Meltor

Innovation through diversity<sup>®</sup>



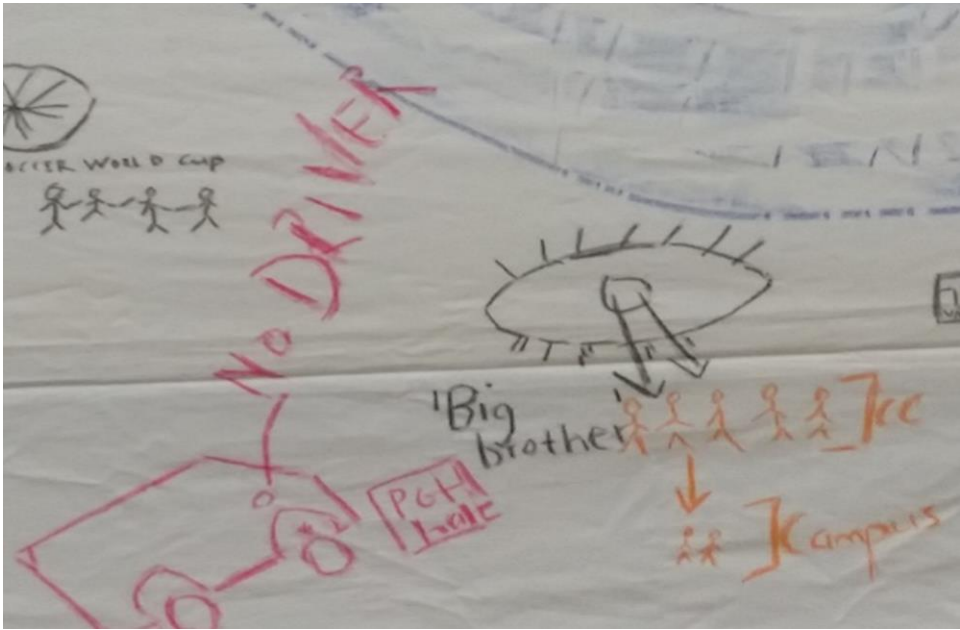
**ANNEXURE H**

**Choice of logo for Curatio (submitted by participants).**

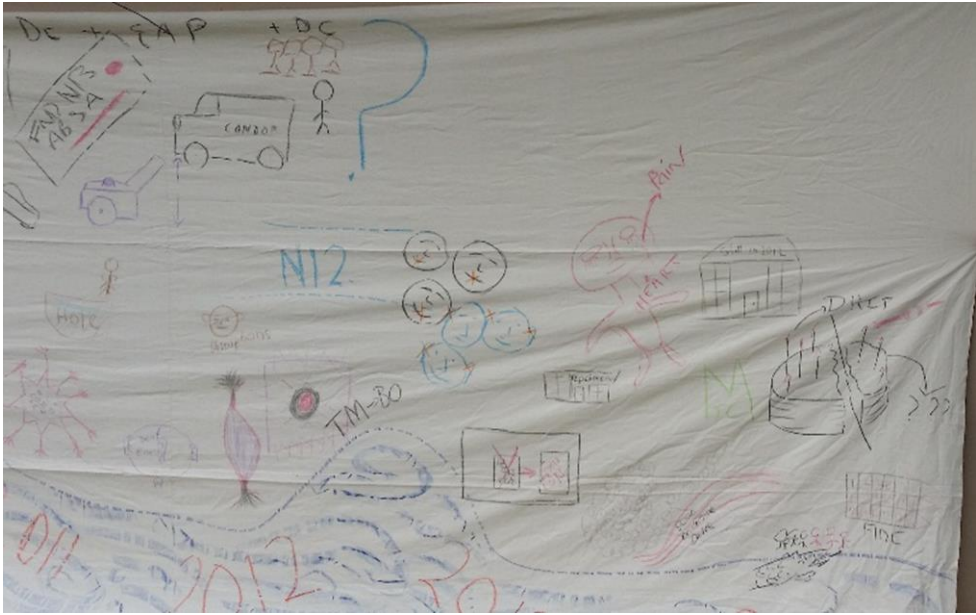




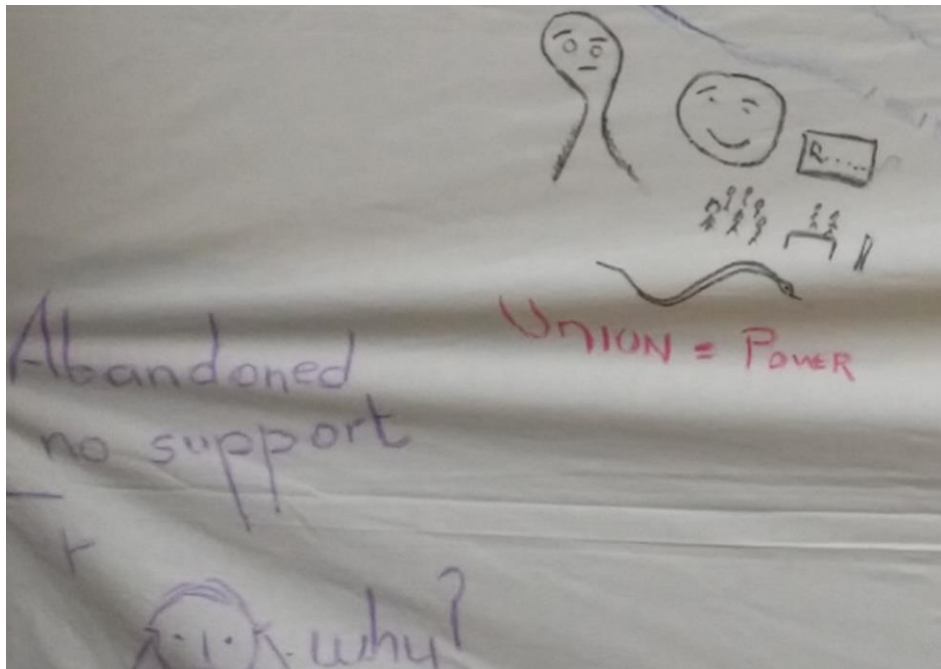
**ANNEXURE I**  
**Sample drawings from first Collage.**



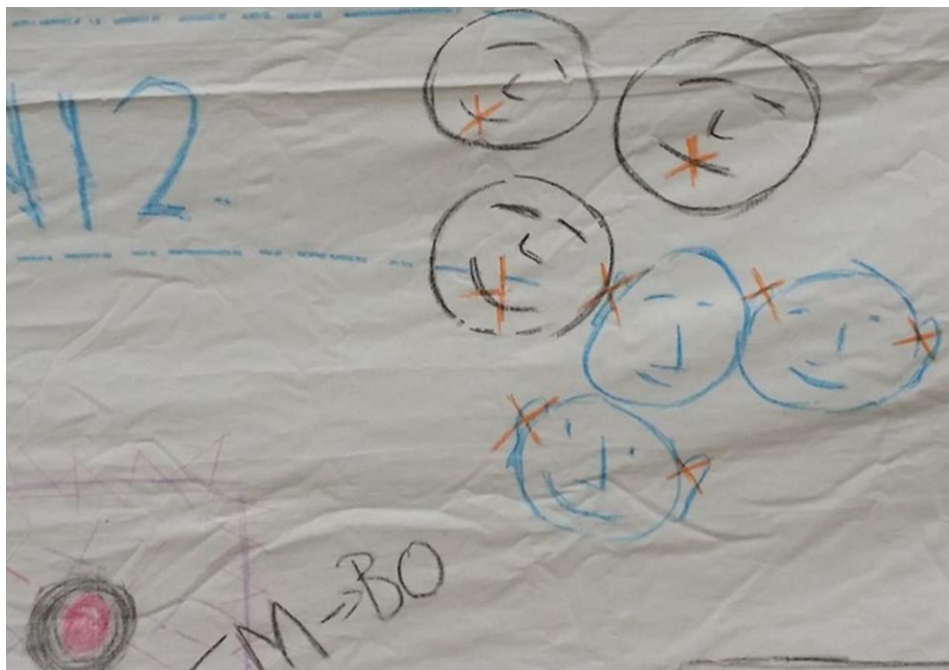
Participants indicates no leadership (no driver) and false guilt (Big Brother watching you).



Participant felt pain and hurt because she is not listened to and her buildings are a hazard and she must take responsibility, not supported but must be accountable



Participant expressed feeling of abandonment by Top Management while another depicted unions having too much power (Students affected by power play between unions and management who are weak)



Participant indicates poor communication (crosses over ears and mouth) that leads to emotional trauma by showing some people are not allowed to speak while management do not listen.

## ANNEXURE J

### Sample drawing from the second collage



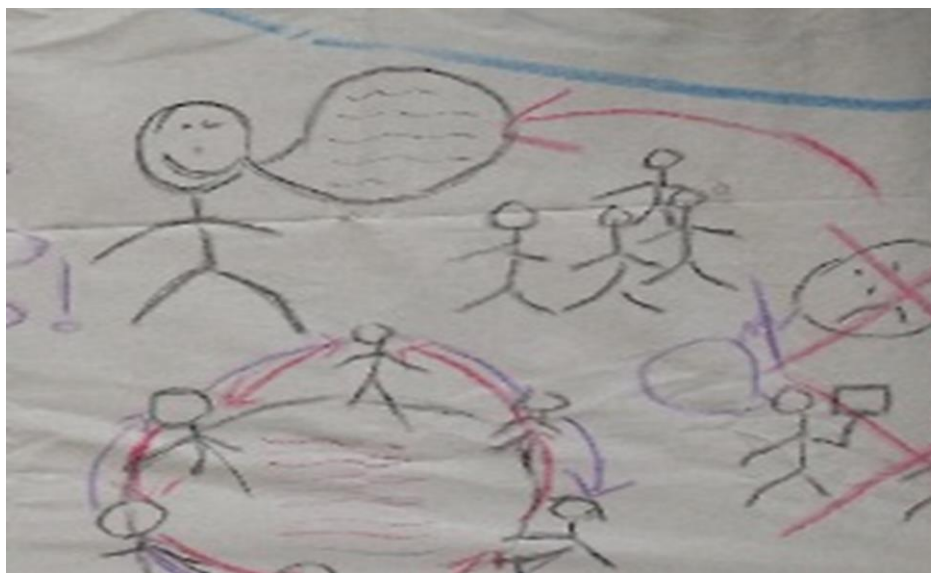
Participant shows hope leaving the past to reap the fruit of a better future.



Participant shows people standing in the sun enjoying fairness and justice (values are lived out in the workplace). Work can be evaluated fairly and appropriately rewarded, but hesitant on how soon that will be.



Participant expresses hope in better (+) communication from leaders and a unity in diversity in the college. Plant indicates strong roots (foundation) with colourful flowers depicting hope.



Participant shows a round table for inclusive participation by employees. The striking staff or students will be no more shown by crosses over them and are encouraged to dialogue shown by the arrow which will result in the happy staff.

**ANNEXURE K**  
**Police controlling student strike action.**



Police called to ensure the safety of staff and property during strike action



Sometimes the presence of police during a strike only aggravates the situation. Here the road was closed to protect people and property during a student strike and demonstration.

## ANNEXURE L

Poster campaign highlighting the need to live out fully life enhancing values (posters were designed by the ALS participants)

**COMMUNICATION**

**DEFINITION**

Communication is the 2-way exchange of opinions, news and information by writing, speech or gestures including body language and facial reactions.

**QUOTES**

*"Communication is a skill that you can learn. It's like riding a bicycle or typing. If you're willing to work at it, you can rapidly improve the quality of every part of your life."*  
- Brian Tracy

*"the single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."*

*"The basic building block of good communications is the feeling that every human being is unique and of value." - Unknown*

*"The effectiveness of communication is not defined by the communication, but by the response". Milton Erikson*

*"I speak to everyone in the same way, whether he is the garbage man or the president of the university". Albert Einstein*

*"In many ways effective communication begins with mutual respect, communication that inspires, encourages others to do their best" Zig Ziglar*

*"People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other". Martin Luther King Jr.*

**TO DO**

1. Respect other people's views in the workplace or in class.
2. Communicate today with someone who you have ignored in the past.
3. Before speaking listen to the other person, what are they really saying?

**CURATIO - "WE CARE!!!!"**

# Inclusiveness

## DEFINITION

*The process of inclusion engages each individual and makes people feeling valued essential to the success of the organization. Individuals function at full capacity, feel more valued, and included in the organization's mission*

## QUOTES



*"Create inclusion - with simple mindfulness that others might have a different reality from your own." Patti Digh*

*"Urging an organization to be inclusive is not an attack. It's progress." DaShanne Stokes*

*"Inclusion is not a matter of political correctness. It is the key to growth." Jesse Jackson*

---

## TO DO

1. Make sure that you include all stakeholders to get the best results.
2. In meetings listen to the small, the weak, the lonely their voice are just as important as those that speak the loudest and continually.
3. Bring people together. Include them in your conversations and it will enrich your conversations and make you wiser.

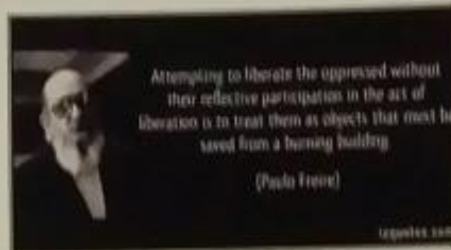
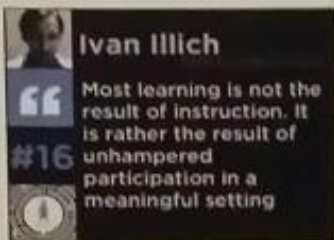
**CURATIO CARES !!!**

# PARTICIPATION

## DEFINITION

Participation is a process through which all members of a community or organisation are involved in and have influence on decisions related to development activities that will affect them.

## QUOTES



## TO DO

1. Encourage staff to actively participate in decision making processes that affect their individual performance.
2. Engage staff in decisions that can contribute to the improvement of the systems, standards and the organisation.
3. Encourage staff and students to participate in their learning process in order to improve on their previous best.

**CURATIO: WE CARE!!!**

# TRUST

## DEFINITION

*Firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something!!!!*

## QUOTES



*"The people when rightly and fully trusted will return the trust." - Abraham Lincoln*

*"He who does not trust enough will not be trusted." - Leo Tyu*

*"Whoever is careless with the truth in small matters cannot be trusted with important matters." - Albert Einstein*

---

## THREE THINGS TO DO!!!!

1. Don't make promises to staff or students that you cannot keep.
2. Trust people enough so they can prove their worth
3. Create the space for staff and students to be trusted.

CURATIO - WE CARE!!!

# Inclusiveness

## DEFINITION

*The process of inclusion engages each individual and makes people feeling valued essential to the success of the organization. Individuals function at full capacity, feel more valued, and included in the organization's mission*

## QUOTES



*"Create inclusion - with simple mindfulness that others might have a different reality from your own." Patti Digh*

*"Urging an organization to be inclusive is not an attack. It's progress." DaShanne Stokes*

*"Inclusion is not a matter of political correctness. It is the key to growth." Jesse Jackson*

## TO DO

1. Make sure that you include all stakeholders to get the best results.
2. In meetings listen to the small, the weak, the lonely their voice are just as important as those that speak the loudest and continually.
3. Bring people together, include them in your conversations and it will enrich your conversations and make you wiser.

**CURATIO CARES !!!**

**ANNEXURE M**  
**Critical Caring Conversation Meeting (Open Space Technology).**



Notice the whiteboard in the back ground has a number of A4 sheets of paper stuck on it. These sheets were stuck up by participants which indicated what they wanted discussed and this process formed the agenda.

## **ANNEXURE N**

**Semi-Structured, Open ended interview question to assess project  
While participants groomed horses.**

### **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE FOR EQUINE GROOMING EXERCISE**

**PROMPT:**

**You recall the first collage that we drew that captured your emotional traumatic events that impacted upon your life and violated your values. You have been part of the ALS and I am going to ask you to reflect on any new experiences that you may have had and how you have dealt with them having been part of the ALS:**

- 1. What was different in the way you handled them (traumatic experiences), what has this taught you about yourself, your colleagues, the college and your coping mechanisms?**
- 2. What have you learned about organisations and organisational development by being part of the research project?**
- 3. In Dialogic organisational development we want to change the language, the communication within an organisation. What words, symbols, phrases, have we used as an ALS group and what must we continue with or add?**

**ANNEXURE O**  
**Template for reflections.**

**REFLECTIVE VIDEO JOURNAL TEMPLATE**

Remember you are reflecting foremost on your own learning as a member of the ACTION LEARNING SET then as a member of the group, reflecting on their joint learning while participating in an action learning project (observe and identify, plan, operationalise and reflect on the cyclical process).

Therefore you will be reflecting on your learning as a participant plus what the participants are doing to address a problem – in our case its toxicity leading to poor health vis-à-vis the lack of lived out values that enhance wellness. An organisation is made up of people therefore if you develop people you start to develop the organisation.

With that in mind you can switch on your video cams and reflect for 5 minutes. Reflect on the data gathering process you did (Collage – drawing).

Context – what I or the group did. This is the least important spend half a minute on it.	Why did I/we do it?	How did I/we do it?	What values does it support?	What did I learn about myself and the group?	What emotions did I have doing it and how did I feel those emotions in my body?

## ANNEXURE P

The College's vision, mission and values statement (Note name removed for ethical reasons).

### STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

#### 1.1 VISION

[REDACTED] FET College strives to be a Further Education and Training Institution of excellence in relevant skills and training.

#### 1.2 MISSION

[REDACTED] FET College is a force for change, which will promote and support:

- The provision of affordable, flexible, high quality programmes and delivery modes, responsive to the needs of the community, commerce and industry.
- Exceptional service through motivated, committed and adequately qualified staff.
- Participation of all stakeholders.
- Prospects for students, employers, community partners and the College.

#### 1.3 KEY VALUES

[REDACTED] FET College is committed to:

- Accountability
- Transparency
- Inclusiveness
- Quality
- Redress of educational opportunities
- Accessibility, and
- Sustainable development