

- **No.58**
- **‘Researching practice’: a first step in evaluating the complex practices in a university-community ‘Knowledge Co-op’**

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- **Abstract:**

- The University of Cape Town (UCT) has recently established the UCT Knowledge Co-op Project to make the knowledge, skills and professional expertise within the university more accessible to external constituencies, especially those that would otherwise not have access to this expertise. Importantly, it also provides a framework for research and teaching and learning that is grounded in an engagement with society. The facility is based on the model of Science Shops which has been used – and evaluated – in Europe and other Northern contexts; yet little is known about its implementation in a more resource constrained context like South Africa where few community groups are aware of a need for research or benefits it might have to them. Because of this, a research project has been set up (with funding from the National Research Foundation in South Africa). It will develop new knowledge about the factors that need to be taken into account to transform the way the university engages with the community and develop a ‘new contract’ between science in its widest sense and society. In order to make sense of university-community partnerships, we argue that one needs to shift the unit of analysis from individualised practices towards the transaction or boundary zone and develop conceptual tools to illuminate the complex practices that occur in the relationship and during the engagement. In this paper, we will discuss and provide an analysis of the first pilot projects completed as research sites in 2011. The paper will consider how the project and its interdisciplinary team was set up; the theoretical and conceptual tools the team is drawing on and the unfolding research process. As part of our research framework and methodology, we will discuss our use of activity theory as a lens to analyse the often multifaceted interactions and relationships occurring in the boundary zone. In particular, we will evaluate the role of the ‘broker’, the many levels of ‘brokering’ their effectiveness in opening access to the university in order to establish guiding principles for partnerships into the future. Finally we will reflect on how the work done in 2011 informs the theory evaluation of the project as well as how this surfaces issues to be considered for the design of the project in its second round during 2012.