Inducting a diverse student body: why 'giving them fish' fails

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Students undertaking Master's degrees in Education display enormous diversity. They may be:

- Part-time/full-time;
- Home/international students;
- On-campus/at a distance;
- From a range of disciplinary backgrounds;
- New graduates/mature returners to study; and
- Without work experience in educational settings/experienced education professionals.

As some of these characteristics are not mutually exclusive, any cohort may contain students with various combinations of the above. Induction programmes, typically, last for one or two weeks at the start of the academic year, are frequently disassociated with the programme of study and do not cater for the needs of part-time or distance learners. The students experience this as a separation from their 'real' studies and their subsequent ability to embed the skills and competencies introduced during induction varies. The fact that distance and part-time students are, by virtue of their status, rarely physically present in a department means that they miss out on potentially supportive induction activities.

Three valuable notions underpin our view of what comprises successful induction. The first is McAlpine and Akerlind's (2010) concept of 'academic identity-trajectory [which] underscores the extent to which individuals tend to link past-present-future experiences in some fashion…' (p.129). Given the possible permutations from the list above, identifying induction needs can prove challenging: what is relevant to one student may entirely miss the mark for another. Unfortunate assumptions are also possible – such as international students not being part-timers – meaning some students with very different educational backgrounds are never exposed to the real meaning of academic practices. This can be further complicated in the field of education, where no one clear purpose for the Master's degree exists, an issue reflected in its attraction to a diverse set of learners.

Second, the concepts of self-regulated learning and metalearning, we argue, support students to become self-evaluative and to understand how the academic skills introduced during induction actually link to future learning behaviours. The capacity for self-regulation fosters higher levels of autonomy in students, has been associated with increased academic attainment (Ning & Downing, 2012) and a more positive attitude to study (Zimmerman, 2000). Students are not only capable of monitoring their own learning but are aware of their limitations and when they need help (Zumbrun, Tadlock et al., 2011). The ability to self-regulate has also been associated with increased academic self-efficacy (Tavakolizadeha and Ebrahimi-Qavam, 2012).

All those necessary elements of induction – library tours, ethics, plagiarism, English language support, finance, departmental and university regulations – have been issues to be 'transmitted upfront' so that 'students know'. In order to support this 'knowing' activities are needed that contextualise them within the discipline, are supportive of students developing self-evaluative and regulatory skills - in short we need programmes that support the development of self-regulated learning (Boekaerts et al., 2000). If students are not simply presented with a definition of plagiarism, for example, but internalise its meaning, they understand the difference between replicating the literature base and using it to construct an evidence-based argument. They can identify in their own work (and that of others) instances of potential plagiarism, and are able to avoid such practices. By facilitating the development of metalearning capacity (Meyer & Shanahan, 2004) students can develop a personally meaningful lens to appreciate the diverse and contested theories and practices of education as a field of study.

The third tool we draw upon is Lea and Street's (1998) argument for 'academic literacies' which recognises the complex social practices embedded in academic writing for assessment which is how student achievement and progression are measured. If the student body is diverse, the same can be argued for

academic staff in any School of Education where various primary disciplines (Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy, curriculum subjects) and national and professional origins are found. Appreciating this suggests that practices communicated through induction activities are likely to value particular disciplinary and experiential viewpoints, thoroughly dependent on who is doing the communicating. With many staff contributing to induction due to strengths and interests, students can perceive conflicting messages. This can indicate to novice PGT students, sometimes inadvertently, what is valued, 'what constitutes valid knowledge' (Lea and Street, 1998: 169). This can be problematic: establishing the necessary intersubjectivity can hinge on what is taken away from induction activities. Strongly competing paradigms mean that this period may influence the whole study experience.

A challenge in our current work designing such programmes, then, is to create flexible activities that can be used in a range of situations and by a diverse range of students that take these key principles into account. Induction activities need to value all forms of knowledge equally, which can be a challenge to academics schooled in particular epistemologies; learning activities and outcomes should enable choice. Activities need to be flexible, relevant, meaningful and seen as something integral to the students' programme of study rather than a 'one-off' event. Acknowledging different forms of knowledge production and representation (Lea and Street, 1998) plays its role here, with the caveat that this approach too, can be a challenge to learners from diverse backgrounds.

It is in this diversity that a metalearning approach can prove invaluable, as many perspectives can be contemplated and supported. By refraining from transmitting 'right' and 'wrong' during the pivotal induction process, plurality can be encouraged. Students can develop a deep engagement with their subjects and induction can be seen to play a role in establishing authentic student positioning. The need to find an 'academic voice' may become subjugated to perceived requirements of individual tutors (Lea and Street, 1998) in order to pass, and not, therefore, support the growth and development of each learner (McAlpine and Akerlind, 2010). It is in the preparation of individuals to take forward their learning – that may but does not necessarily have its roots in a particular career aim – that induction must function responsibly. This cannot be accomplished in Week 1 but is an ongoing process to support individuals in their interests and motivations. We report here on an evaluation of redesigned induction activities that encompass these principles, to see how successful we have been in giving our students the requisite tools and teaching them to fish throughout their academic careers.

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