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Culture Shock and the Gendered Teaching Experiences of New Academics

Helen Hooper¹, Susan Matheison¹, Kate Black¹, Linda Allin¹, Libby Orme¹, Emma Anderson¹, Roger Penlington¹, Lynn McInnes¹

¹*Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, United Kingdom*

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Abstract: This study, by a group of academic developers investigating the experiences of academics of their induction to teaching, is underpinned by Cultural Historical Activity Theory. CHAT provides a framework for collaborative research for bringing about changes in thinking and practice through identification and understanding of contradictions in 'activity systems'. The 'activity system' for induction to teaching was collaboratively mapped and used to interview academics. Interview transcript analysis surfaced typical patterns of experience and revealed academics experienced contradictions with both sociocultural and structural aspects of 'activity systems' for induction to teaching. Findings included gendered teaching experiences and the extent, nature and impact of the teaching and learning 'culture shock', such as perceived 'power imbalance' resulting from student feedback. Exploring these contradictions enabled academic developers to collaborate in developing interventions rooted in academics' lived experiences. Reflections on the 'expansive learning' promoted by researcher engagement with CHAT will also be shared.

Paper: Findings from a collaborative research project underpinned by Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)¹⁻³ are presented in this paper. Research was undertaken in an UK University by a group of academic developers who aimed to better understand the experiences of new academics in order to improve induction to teaching.

Interest in how academics develop their identities and practices as teachers, through participation in the unstable practices of contemporary neoliberal higher education persists^{4,5} and has highlighted both a lack of institutional focus on academic induction impacting on staff retention⁶ and impact of performativity in changing how teaching is managed⁷.

CHAT has been used in higher education to facilitate collaborative research to identify and address educational challenges⁸⁻¹⁰ but has not been used to investigate induction to teaching. CHAT is a theory of 'expansive learning' and transformation through collaborative reflection on contradictions within 'activity systems'¹, focussed on socially situated learning through engaging in everyday tasks - in this case how academics learn to teach. 'Activity systems' comprise six interconnected elements

which were defined for the 'activity system' for induction of academics to teaching (see Figure 1), with effective induction into teaching defined as the 'outcome'.

The 'activity system' for induction into teaching informed development of a semi-structured interview protocol and the analysis of 12 volunteer new academic interviews (2 male, 9 female, 1 trans-female; 5 were from the UK, 3 from the EU, and 4 were international; 2 new staff from 6 academic departments). Data analysis focussed on surfacing typical patterns of experience and identifying key contradictions and tensions between elements of the 'activity system', within and between departments, as the basis for collaborative discussion and proposals for change to the way academics are inducted into teaching across the University.

An iterative analytical approach was adopted¹¹, investigators moved back-and-forth between data and the CHAT framework. Theme-codes were initially distilled from interview narratives, clustered into over-arching categories and both theme-codes and categories were organised around the nodes of the 'activity system' (Figure 1) for induction to teaching.

Findings presented in this paper will focus on the tensions and contractions experienced by 'the subject' of the 'activity system' - academics new to teaching - stemming from unsupported demands on inexperienced teachers and contradictions between the expectation at appointment of research, and the impact of teaching and administrative workloads.

Many new academics reportedly experienced a 'culture shock' upon arrival and especially in relation to unexpected challenges surrounding the management of students' behaviour, engagement with learning, and their ability and motivation to learn.

"..teaching driven students is the best thing in the world, but how do you motivate them? They're not willing to be motivated. That's a big challenge, .. I don't know how to crack it, but I actually do enjoy teaching"

Evaluation metrics, such as Institutional Key Performance Indicators surrounding minimum satisfaction scores in the National Student Survey, were perceived as prioritising making students 'happy', rather than necessarily learning, challenging pre-existing conceptions of good educational practice. The nature, extent and demands surrounding student feedback were experienced as an unexpected 'power imbalance'. Participants also reported the negative impact the quest for student satisfaction had upon mental health.

"So here it's a lot more about making students happy, which is something that I'm learning a lot... I wasn't thinking about that before, because the way in which I was studying was completely different"

Changes in recruitment to appoint younger, research-active academics, brought some women into traditionally male practice-based disciplines, and reportedly presented challenges to these female academics who found establishing credibility with students difficult. However, this varied between disciplines, with another academic commenting the new discipline culture was less traditionally

masculine than previously experienced.

"..for me as a female .. lecturer .. it is much more of a challenge than for [male colleague] stepping in the room. I feel like I am on the back foot. You know, the majority of our students are males, as well, so, that is a kind of interesting tension.. Almost have to sell why you're here in the first place."

Adopting a CHAT research framework committed investigators to exploring potential for 'transformative agency'. Our collective understanding of how academics' learning about teaching was shaped by contradictions impacting on the 'activity systems' for their induction to teaching was developed, including heightened sensitivity to the threatened sense of wellbeing of new academics managing conflicting demands, and motivated collaborative work to develop better support mechanisms. Findings support previous research on induction on the value of informal learning in departmental communities⁶, mentoring^{12,13} and critical reflection on practice¹⁴.

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Figure 1: 'Activity Systems' for the induction of staff to teaching in disciplines and departments.

