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An Activity Theory analysis of professional support and technical staff experiences of induction into teaching.

Helen Hooper, David Hooper

Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This study, by an academic developer and service manager, investigating the experiences of Professional Support and Technical staff 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 contradictions in 'activity systems'. The mapped 'activity system' for induction to teaching was used to interview staff. Interview transcript analysis surfaced typical patterns of experience and revealed staff experienced contradictions with both sociocultural and structural aspects of the induction 'activity systems'. Findings identified barriers to engaging in relevant CPD and the extent, nature and impact of the teaching and learning 'culture shock', such as perceived 'power imbalance' between PST staff and academic staff. Exploring these contradictions enabled the researchers to collaborate in developing interventions rooted in lived experiences. Reflections on 'expansive learning' promoted by researcher engagement with CHAT will be shared.

Full 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 an academic developer and professional service manager who aimed to better understand the induction into teaching experiences of professional support and technical staff in order to improve induction into, and support for their role in teaching and supporting student learning.

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 a range of issues such as a lack of institutional focus on academic induction impacting on staff retention⁶ and impact of the performativity in changing how teaching is managed⁷. In contrast, there is a relative paucity of research focussing on the experiences of, and support for professional support and technical staff who teach.

CHAT has been used in higher education to facilitate collaborative research to identify and address educational challenges⁸⁻¹⁰ but has only been used to investigate academic staff induction to teaching¹¹. 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 professional support and technical staff learn to teach. 'Activity systems' comprise six interconnected elements which were defined for the 'activity system' for induction of professional support and technical staff to teaching as follows, with effective induction into teaching defined as the 'outcome'

- The Subject: professional support and technical staff new to teaching and supporting learning
- The Object: induction into teaching
- The Community: who and how they support learning about teaching
- Tools and Resources: that support induction into teaching
- Rules: governing induction to teaching
- Division of labour: for professional support and technical staff new to teaching and supporting learning

The 'activity system' for induction into teaching informed development of a semi-structured interview protocol and the analysis of 15 volunteer professional support and technical interviews (7 professional support staff and 8 technical staff). Data analysis focussed on surfacing typical patterns of experience and identifying key contradictions and tensions between elements of the 'activity system', within and between services and departments, as the basis for collaborative discussion and proposals for change to the way professional support and technical staff are inducted into teaching across the University.

An iterative analytical approach was adopted¹², investigators moved back-and-forth between data and the CHAT framework. Theme-codes were initially distilled from interview narratives, clustered into overarching categories and both theme-codes and categories were organised around the nodes of the 'activity system' for induction to teaching.

Findings presented in this paper will focus on the tensions and contradictions experienced by 'the subject' of the 'activity system'- professional support and technical staff experiencing induction to teaching - stemming from unsupported demands on inexperienced teachers and contradictions between the expectation at appointment, and the impact of teaching workloads. Findings identified barriers to engaging in relevant CPD and the extent, nature and impact of the teaching and learning 'culture shock', such as perceived 'power imbalance' between professional support and technical staff and academic staff. Exploring these contradictions enabled the researchers to collaborate in developing interventions rooted in lived experiences.

Reflections on 'expansive learning' promoted by researcher engagement with CHAT will be also be shared. Adopting a CHAT research framework committed investigators to exploring potential for 'transformative agency'. Our collective understanding of how professional support and technical staff learning about teaching was shaped by contradictions impacting on the 'activity systems' for their induction to teaching was developed, including heightened sensitivity to the conflicts faced by staff 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^{13,14} and critical reflection on practice¹⁵

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