New academics’ experiences of induction to teaching: using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to understand and improve induction experiences

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ABSTRACT
This paper uses insider research within a Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) framework to examine the lived induction-to-teaching experiences of twelve new academics at a case-study Northern UK university. A CHAT lens foregrounds contradictions as a source for change in the induction-to-teaching process. Data generated through semi-structured interviews with these academics were analysed and, informed by CHAT, allowed us to discern contradictions in sociocultural and structural aspects of the induction activity systems which significantly impact new academics’ experiences. Examining these contradictions enabled us to identify interventions for enhancing academic induction policy and practice within the case-study University, but also more widely.

Introduction
This article uses Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 2001; Engeström et al., 2013, 2014) to better understand, and hence improve, the lived induction-to-teaching experiences of new academics across six disciplines of a post-92 (teaching- and professional practice-focused) University in Northern England, which has shifted to become research intensive. The application of CHAT in this context addresses a gap in existing knowledge and understanding around academic induction-to-teaching.

Induction-to-teaching is crucial to successful academic career transition, and with conventional structures within UK universities creating limited internal opportunity for progression, movement of academics between universities is prevalent, especially in early to mid career (Black & Warhurst, 2019; Fraser et al., 2017). While academics typically maintain pre-existing research networks as they move universities, variability in educational expectations necessitates induction support for teaching (e.g., King et al., 2018). In
this study, we use the term ‘induction-to-teaching’ to include both novice and new-to-university educators. Ineffective induction-to-teaching risks retention and engagement.

This research also addresses the ongoing interest in how academics develop their identities and practices as teachers and how this is supported and threatened as they participate in the contemporary neoliberal university (e.g., Billot & King, 2017; Sutherland & Taylor, 2011). Billot and King (2017) have highlighted the limited support for academics as they (re)create their professional identity during induction. Concurrently, Vos and Page (2020) highlight how a performativity agenda is changing the teaching context through rules and regulations governing learning, teaching, assessment, and research. In countering the performative tendency, the focus for successful induction has been upon the significance of individuals’ socialisation and informal learning within the socio-cultural context of their disciplines and departments (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015; Trowler & Knight, 2000) and the potential this creates for individual and collective academic agency through the induction-to-teaching process. Such socio-cultural approaches evoke a more agentic learning, with Remmik et al. (2011) and Sutherland (2018) advocating the value of tailored support for induction through collegial networks that value the diverse strengths of academics. Mathieson (2011) highlights the importance of space for critical reflection in fostering this academic agency. These studies have, however, typically reported participant perspectives, rather than reporting how academic developers have supported induction-to-teaching.

Moreover, academic developers have been portrayed as inhabiting precarious and marginal positions and vulnerable to capture by institutional management perspectives (Peseta, 2014; Sutherland, 2015). CHAT (Engeström, 2001; Engeström et al., 2013, 2014) presented an opportunity for us to enhance our collective agency, collaborating as academic developers working in a central unit and dispersed across departments to investigate how new academics experience induction-to-teaching, with the intention of informing positive change in the induction-to-teaching process (Mårtensson & Roxå, 2021). Accordingly, our study has two over-arching research questions:

1. How do new academics experience induction-to-teaching?
2. How can our understandings of these academics’ experiences inform positive change in the induction-to-teaching process?

As is discussed in what follows, CHAT allows for an examination of the tensions and contradictions that occur through the induction-to-teaching process and facilitates collaborative changes in thinking to discern enhancements to the induction-to-teaching process. CHAT has been applied to examine multiple educational challenges across higher education (HE) (e.g., Bligh & Flood, 2015; Englund & Price, 2018; Smith et al., 2020), but not to investigate HE induction-to-teaching.

**Theoretical framework**

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is a sociocultural theory, focusing on socially situated learning that occurs through engaging in everyday tasks in ‘activity systems’ (Engeström, 2001). In the context of this research, such theorising draws attention to how academics learn about their teaching role through engaging with
practices within their disciplines and within programme teams (Trowler & Knight, 2000). Viewing academics as learners in a complex learning environment provided an opportunity for us, as academic developers, to approach the induction-to-teaching of academics as an organisational learning process and interrogate how opportunities for learning to teach were coordinated across the university. Significantly, such a sociocultural lens offered an alternative to the more common regulation of academics’ teaching through individualised performative targets for student satisfaction, employability, and other measures used in league tables (Taylor, 2008; Vos & Page, 2020).

CHAT defines ‘activity systems’ through six interconnected elements: the ‘subject’ who engages in an ‘object’ of activity, mediated by various tools and resources, within a ‘community’, by ‘rules’ defining the ‘activity’, and the ‘division of labour’ within which the ‘activity’ takes place (Engeström, 2001). We defined these elements for the ‘activity system’ for the induction of academics to teaching (see Figure 1). The focus of CHAT is on surfacing contradictions within and between these different elements of the ‘activity system’, and with other ‘activity systems’, in order to generate collaborative discussion. Engeström (2001, 2013) discerns his concept of ‘expansive learning’ to explain how such discussion provides opportunities to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions. Through this process, the ‘object’ of activity, in this case, induction-to-teaching, is changed through engaging with contradictions between the different elements within and between ‘activity systems’, supporting us to ‘break away from given frames of action and [take] . . . initiatives to transform them collaboratively’ (Virkkunen, 2006, p. 2).

There has been considerable interest in applications of the CHAT methodology for bringing about change in higher education (Bligh & Flood, 2015). It has been applied by academic developers as a tool for the professional development of HE teaching through engaging academics in reflection on contradictions and tensions in a programme to stimulate change in thinking and practices (Englund & Price, 2018). To date, however, this approach has not been applied to academics’ induction-to-teaching.

Research has illustrated the significant tensions between research and teaching that academics face within contemporary HE and which present particular

Figure 1. Key contradictions within the ‘activity system’ for induction to teaching and with the research ‘activity system’.
challenges for new academics as they seek to (re)create their identity within a new HE context (Mathieson, 2011; Smith et al., 2020). For example, Boyd (2010) has highlighted the existence of contradictions between research and teaching in a non-research-intensive university, where there was ‘a strong emphasis on academic induction and professional development related to teaching, but some ambivalence towards research activity’ (p. 158). By contrast, we sought to understand the contradictions faced by new academics within an institution where academics tend to be rewarded for the quality of their research outputs rather than for the quality of teaching (e.g., Lem, 2022).

We now outline our empirical study using insider inquiry to examine new academics’ induction-to-teaching, surfacing the tensions and contradictions they experienced. We then discuss how our key findings have enabled us to discern approaches to enhancing induction-to-teaching, both centrally and within disciplines and departments. We conclude by reflecting on the value of CHAT in developing a more critical and scholarly approach as academic developers to supporting academics’ induction-to-teaching.

**Methods of data generation and analysis**

Our empirical study employs a CHAT framework (Engeström, 2001; Engeström et al., 2013, 2014) allowing us, as academic developers, to better understand the lived induction-to-teaching experiences of new academics and to discern contradictions and tensions in the activity system of induction-to-teaching to enhance this process at institutional and departmental levels. The application of CHAT in this context addresses a gap in existing knowledge and understanding around academic induction-to-teaching.

**Research case and sample**

Following institutional ethical approval, twelve participants were selected from the case-study university in Northern England using purposive volunteer sampling within each of the investigators’ departments (Psychology, Leadership and Human Resource Management, Sport Exercise and Rehabilitation, Mechanical and Construction Engineering, Applied Science, Computing and Information Systems). Two participants were male and ten were female; five were from the UK, three from the EU, and four were international colleagues.

The case-study university was a former teaching and professional-practice-led institution that had recently transitioned to prioritise its research-rich focus. While academic recruitment is driven primarily by candidates’ excellence in research as defined by quality publications, all academics have equal responsibility for teaching and research, and workloads are assigned primarily on the basis of teaching and education administration; in this context quality teaching is assumed to ‘just happen’. CHAT’s identification of ‘activity systems’ at the interface between structural and sociocultural practices (Englund & Price, 2018) enabled us as researchers to surface and interrogate these apparent contradictions.
Data generation

Data were generated using semi-structured interviews with participants. Intentionally, academic developer investigators did not interview participants from their own departments. The interview protocol was informed by the ‘activity system’ for the induction of academics into their teaching role. Induction-to-teaching was discerned by the investigators as the process by which new-to-the-institution academics were supported to develop their personal (e.g., self-esteem and self-efficacy) and professional (e.g., technical know-how, collegial and reflective practices) understanding of teaching and learning within that institution’s context. Accordingly, interviews examined these facets of the participants’ experiences as well as the following facets:

- their ‘community’: departmental/faculty colleagues, teaching and programme teams, and students;
- ‘mediational tools’: resources for induction, both centrally and in disciplines and departments;
- ‘rules’: explicit policies initiated by Human Resources and within departments/faculties relating to academics’ induction and probationary period, also implicit norms of the ‘community’ in relation to teaching expectations during induction; and
- ‘division of labour’: roles occupied in the ‘activity system’, both expectations on new academics in relation to research, teaching, and administration and allocation of support for induction-to-teaching in departments and centrally.

Interviews lasted between 40 and 65 minutes and were digitally recorded. Interviews were transcribed verbatim to enable analysis of participants’ narratives.

Being insider researchers offered the benefits of immediate rapport with the participants and an empathetic understanding of their experiences such that the research involved the co-creation of knowledge and understanding between investigators and participants. However, we were, as discussed below, necessarily critically reflexive in considering how, as academic developers within the same institution as our participants, we were influencing the emerging narratives of their experiences, the analysis of our data, and the conclusions we drew.

Data analysis

The focus of analysis was upon constructing typical patterns of experience of induction-to-teaching found within and between departments and discerning contradictions experienced by participants in their induction-to-teaching to inform changes to induction. An iterative analytical approach was adopted to understand the participants’ experiences and to expose the tensions and contradictions they faced. Moving back and forth between the data and the CHAT framework enabled codes to be distilled and then clustered, informed by the CHAT elements, for example, ‘Subject: inexperienced teacher’, ‘Object/Community: programme teams’, ‘Division of Labour: research-teaching contradictions’. Categorisation of the identified tensions used three types of
contradiction identified within and between ‘activity systems’ (Engeström, 2001; Zou et al., 2022), namely

- primary contradictions, where there is more than one value system within an activity;
- secondary contradictions, between the six elements of an activity system; and
- quaternary contradictions, between an activity system and neighbouring activity systems.

We chose not to draw upon Engeström’s (2001) ‘tertiary contradictions’ that emerge in the ‘object’ when a new system is introduced because the data of new academics’ experiences of induction-to-teaching were generated prior to changes being introduced. Finally, we discerned the resultant ‘expansive learning’ opportunities for improving induction into teaching.

Acknowledging the validity threats facing qualitative studies, analysis followed established standards for ensuring credibility, relevance, and trustworthiness (e.g., O’Brien et al., 2014; Tracy, 2010) with the following procedures followed. First, the theme-codes used in the analysis emerged through multiple independent readings by the investigators of the data and CHAT literatures (Engeström, 2001; Engeström et al., 2013, 2014). The final theme-codes discerned to analyse the data were agreed upon through the investigators comparing their independently derived theme-codes and challenging each other’s understandings of the data. Throughout the subsequent analysis, the investigators reviewed each other’s coding to ensure consistency in their interpretation of the data. Second, reflexive examination of the analytical processes allowed the investigators’ own influences upon the data to be discerned. Informed by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2017), this reflexive examination involved the following stages. First, to help surface our assumptions on the situation, we discussed, for example, how our situated position and decisions might influence the data and their interpretation. Second, we questioned and challenged these assumptions though asking such questions as, ‘What led me to that perception?’, ‘Why did I conclude that?’. Third, we revised our assumptions in light of this discussion and questioning.

**Findings**

Data analysis highlighted tensions and contradictions facing new academics in their induction-to-teaching. These tensions and contradictions are organised around the elements of the ‘activity system’ for induction-to-teaching, illustrated by representative quotations from participants, and emerge as sources for rethinking support for induction-to-teaching, as illustrated in Figure 1. Given the research focus on academics’ experiences of induction-to-teaching, the ‘subject’ is taken as the starting point. We then work out to the ‘object’ and ‘community’ context for induction, followed by ‘mediating tools and resources’, and finally ‘rules’ and ‘division of labour’ that create the structural conditions framing induction-to-teaching.
Subject: academics who are new to teaching

Our new academics’ induction-to-teaching experiences were significantly affected by contradictions between this ‘activity system’ and that of induction-to-research, resulting in unsupported demands on inexperienced academics. Many participants were very early in their careers and were recruited for their research excellence, and those having joined the university from overseas were typically unfamiliar with UK education. These colleagues were facing significant time-rich research targets as well as an excessive, and largely unsupported, teaching and administration workload. As Participant 12 asserted, ‘I just moved across the ocean [...] giving me two brand-new modules [to develop and manage] doesn’t really make sense with my research targets’. This quaternary contradiction experienced by the ‘subject’ with the ‘division of labour’ between the ‘activity systems’ for teaching and research was constraining necessary reflection upon, and conceptual development of, their teaching practice. While some participants had found ways to integrate research and teaching, many were required to teach outside of their research area.

Tensions between research and teaching ‘activity systems’ also surfaced in the relationships between these new academics’ ‘subjectivities’ and ‘communities’ of existing academics who had historically privileged teaching. This secondary contradiction was explained by Participant 12:

You have new academic hires such as myself who have PhDs and are research driven, and colleagues who don’t value research quite as much. Umm, they don’t see how it’s relevant to the teaching practice [...] there’s a bit of tension.

These tensions between the ‘activity systems’ emphasise how cultural change to prioritise research had created challenges for new academics in developing coherent subjectivities that balanced all expectations placed upon them.

Secondary contradictions within the ‘activity system’ for induction-to-teaching were evident between the ‘subject’ and implicit ‘rules’ about what was important for becoming an effective educator. Participants felt their pre-existing conceptions of good educational practice for effecting learning were being challenged by institutional Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) necessitating 90% satisfaction in the UK’s National Student Survey. As Participant 4 asserted, ‘It’s a lot more about making students happy [...] I wasn’t thinking about that before, because the way in which I was studying was completely different’. Prioritising satisfaction over learning reportedly produced a significant workload, impeded the development of academic-student learning relationships, and was negatively impacting some participants’ mental health and wellbeing:

I had two hundred first years wanting to see me personally. It was a massive strain. At the end of the term, I was just done. [...] I was only sleeping three to four hours a night.
( Participant 4)

A further secondary contradiction was felt between the ‘subject’, typically younger, research-active academics, and the ‘object’, induction-to-teaching. Participants reported the ‘shock’ they felt due to many students’ behaviour and limited learning engagement. Participant 12 explained,
I’ve been a bit taken aback about the level of attendance [...] I wouldn’t bank on the students having read anything before coming to class. And also, just disruptive behaviour; being on their phones, chatting when I’m talking.

Participant 1 commented, ‘I don’t understand why students don’t come to the labs [...] if they do come, they’re not interested’.

Secondary contradictions were also identified in the ‘activity system’ for induction-to-teaching in the values implicit within some disciplines. For example, disciplines comprising conventionally masculine practice-based ‘communities’ were reportedly often at odds with the ‘subjectivities’ of younger, research-active women. Participant 9 reported that ‘One of my students I felt was challenging me as a new lecturer or a female lecturer compared to the older male lecturers they had previously’. Although, by contrast, Participant 7 commented on how the discipline culture was less traditionally masculine than at her previous university. These contradictions between established departmental ‘communities’ and newly appointed academic ‘subjects’ challenged us to address attitudes about gender and age held by both academics and students.

Significantly, how these new academics saw themselves, and thus their commitment to teaching relative to their research, influenced how they engaged with the ‘object’, induction-to-teaching; these academic ‘subjectivities’ enabled some new academics to overcome the challenges of teaching for the first time with limited support. As Participant 5 explained,

I put a lot of effort to prepare teaching [...] It is maybe also from my culture we have very high respect for the lecturers or teachers that makes me feel alright to work hard and be well prepared for teaching.

**Object: induction-to-teaching, and ‘communities’ supporting induction**

Support for induction-to-teaching was largely based in departmental ‘communities’ so these are reported concurrent with the ‘object’.

Differing experiences of support for induction-to-teaching were evident across departmental ‘communities’ and have guided proposals for change resulting from this research. Where ‘communities’ offered limited formal support, participants ‘found it a bit confusing and overwhelming’ (Participant 4). Yet, by contrast, participants in some other departments reported a breadth of ‘community’ support, including education-focused discussion groups. That ‘communities’ were central to new academics’ effective induction-to-teaching was evidenced by Participant 8: ‘I’ve had people I could speak to [...] We’ve also got a department teaching and learning guide telling me what needs to be done and when its needs to be done’.

Where assigned, teaching mentoring was greatly valued, although there were reported variations in levels of support offered and, too often mentors, were appointed late, leaving these new academics to ‘sink or swim’ at the outset. As Participant 9 reported,

Had I had her from the beginning, she would have been able to guide me [...] [now] she’s amazing, she’s sent me stuff, scheduled meetings, talking me through some of the doubts I have had.
Programme and module teams were also identified by some participants as significant ‘communities’ enabling them to learn about teaching: ‘We have had several meetings as the [programme] team about changes to the course structure […] That is where I have learned’ (Participant 3). However, a primary contradiction for these new academics emerged in departments where there was poor communication about the purpose of meetings. Participant 9 explained that ‘I didn’t really understand. I got lots of emails saying there is a meeting and it’s hard to know whether I should be going to this or not’. Participants also identified the significance of informal ‘communities’ for their induction. As Participant 4 reported,

Colleagues who started […] [around the same time], we were a very close group because we were also figuring things out together […] when one person knew how to do something they could tell everyone else.

However, a primary contradiction in the ‘community’ was recurringingly reported where new academics often considered colleagues were too busy to support them: ‘You don’t know what to do and every time you have to ask a colleague […] but you’re not sure of asking, because you don’t want to interrupt them’ (Participant 1).

**Mediating tools and resources for induction-to-teaching**

Our participants’ experiences led us to recognise a range of informal ‘resources’ that supported their induction-to-teaching, including informal observation and role modelling of colleagues, for example, through team teaching, shadowing, and utilising colleagues’ teaching resources. As Participant 3 explained, ‘I didn’t know how to [write an exam paper], but I looked at other exams. I followed their process’. Concurrently, formalised observation procedures were also valued: ‘Peer observation was good, I enjoyed seeing how other lecturers do things. Their observation of me improves my teaching a lot, they don’t just say fix this and this, they say the things you do right as well’ (Participant 4).

However, various contradictions were also evident. A significant primary contradiction emerged where many of the participants experienced poor teaching ‘resources’ that risked their effective educational practice, such as inadequate room capacity and poor timetabling. Our data also highlighted what we recognised as a secondary contradiction between the formal centralised teaching programme for new academics and the immediate needs of these ‘subjects’. While participants on the programme found it interesting, they reported that it rarely provided support for immediate teaching or classroom challenges, which has led us to examine how, as academic developers, we might address these gaps in central teaching ‘resources’ to better meet the articulated needs of new academics. As Participant 6 explained,

[It] is quite useful, but there are practical gaps […] that’s the problem. I’m super happy to understand flipped learning and whatever, but in reality, what will help me is learning how to deal with these [problems I’m facing now].
'Rules’ and ‘division of labour’ for induction-to-teaching

‘Rules’ within this ‘activity system’ were typically revolving around the ‘division of labour’, the workload expectations for academics on probation. We identified a primary contradiction in the lack of transparency around probationary ‘Rules’, which one academic said was ‘one of the major stresses in my life [...] because I don’t know where I’m standing’ (Participant 4). The lack of transparency was exacerbated by a further primary contradiction in the reactive and impersonal way that ‘Rules’ were communicated. As Participant 7 explained,

The first you hear about it is you’re getting an email saying you are in breach of your role because you haven’t done this, and if you don’t do it immediately you will be called in for a formal meeting.

Opaque ness in these ‘rules’ governing teaching was for some participants intensified by a secondary contradiction between the ‘division of labour’ and ‘resources’ to support teaching. For example, Participant 1 reported being given challenging teaching demands without adequate preparation: ‘They just gave me the module and said, “you’re the module leader, you know about [subject] so it’s fine”’, while Participant 12 explained, ‘if I’d been told earlier what I’m going to teach, I’d actually feel more comfortable. If I had at least one week in between, so I can [...] start prepping a bit earlier’. However, for some participants, this secondary contradiction between ‘rules’ governing the ‘division of labour’ and ‘resources’ to support induction did not exist: ‘I didn’t have to start teaching straight away, as I started in April and my teaching started in September, but most of that was spent doing induction and kind of training courses and things like that’ (Participant 8).

The secondary contradiction between teaching workloads (‘division of labour’) and ‘resources’ to support teaching, such as large class sizes and academic workload pressures, was also necessitating some academic ‘subjects’ to teach contrary to their values and their pedagogic understanding:

It’s a challenge leading those big modules [...] just keeping all the balls in the air [...] people are parachuting in, one lecture here and there. There’s no connection with the students. I don’t think that’s the most effective way of going about it. (Participant 12)

Quaternary contradictions in the ‘division of labour’ for the ‘activity systems’ for teaching and research and the opacity of ‘rules’ governing this ‘division of labour’ were compounding the challenges faced by new academics. As Participant 1 explained, ‘I’m worried because next year I have three modules [...] I won’t have time to do research’, yet research was prioritised at their recruitment and was the criterion upon which these academics were more readily performance managed.

Implications: ‘expansive learning’ opportunities for enhancing induction-to-teaching practices

Distinguishing our participants’ experiences, and the tensions and contradictions they faced within the induction-to-teaching activity system, as summarised in Figure 1, enabled us to examine our second research question of discerning ‘expansive learning’ opportunities for enhancing induction-to-teaching practices. Initial discussion of the
contradictions and tensions led us to consider the wider context influencing HE teaching over which we, as academic developers, had limited agency. This context included dissonances experienced through the increased marketisation of HE with learning being viewed as a commodity and its effectiveness measured performatively. We also identified how contradictions between the ‘activity systems’ for teaching and research were exacerbated within the case-study institution by the evolving strategy to privilege research.

However, in adopting a CHAT research framework, we had committed to exploring our potential as academic developers for ‘transformative agency’ (Virkkunen, 2006). Therefore, our collaborative focus was on interrogating the identified contradictions within and between the ‘activity systems’ that were impacting induction-to-teaching. The purpose was to discern ‘expansive transformations’ (Engeström, 2001) in our understanding of the ‘activity system’ supporting new academics’ induction-to-teaching. Accordingly, within the departments in which we had influence, we focused on change interventions that could positively impact academics’ induction-to-teaching experiences. We also identified opportunities where we could influence institution-wide practices, developing a more joined-up approach between departmental and institutional induction practices.

For the ‘subject’, new academics, we initially questioned whether Engeström et al.’s (2013) ‘expansive learning’ to bring about change was possible, given our limited agency at the local level to influence the contradictions that emerged. However, through further discussion, we moved from an initial sense of powerlessness to influence the mismatch between the recruitment of research-active and inexperienced educators who found themselves facing heavy teaching demands, to identify collaborative interventions to enhance support in this context. Through developing our understanding of the ‘activity system’ for induction-to-teaching as a system located both in departments and centrally, we realised our collective agency as academic developers. We collaborated across these boundaries, informed by what we had learned about academics’ varied experiences across disciplines regarding their induction-to-teaching.

Our participants had highlighted the impact of the mis-‘fit’ between their induction into the ‘activity systems’ for teaching and for research, as well as the unevenness of ‘resources’ supporting induction-to-teaching across departments. Although we have little agency to influence the ‘division of labour’ and ‘rules’ around teaching workloads and the resultant tensions between research and teaching responsibilities, we were able to develop some institutional ‘rules’ to embed ‘resources’ into departmental induction practices that provided the support these new academics reportedly needed within their teaching induction. Informed by extant research advocating mentoring to provide support (e.g., Billot & King, 2017; Sutherland, 2018), these new ‘rules’ established that new academics be assigned a teaching mentor upon appointment. New academics and mentors would meet regularly and, within the first 6 weeks, explore existing educational strengths and teaching responsibilities to identify any necessary development to address gaps.

We also collaboratively developed new institutional ‘resources’ to address specific gaps raised by our participants, including workshops on ‘classroom management’ and ‘research-informed teaching’, while developing problem-based scenarios for mentor training workshops that picked up on participant concerns such as poor student feedback.
We developed an institution-wide workshop that included more explicit guidance for new academics on teaching responsibilities across the academic year by drawing on interview findings relating to the ‘community’ and that identified effective induction-to-teaching practices in one department. Our findings highlight the value of informal learning, and the literature asserts the value of informal collegial networks (e.g., Billot & King, 2017). At the institutional level, we have therefore highlighted the value of room shares and providing opportunities for team teaching and shadowing as part of the formal workload in order to build necessary departmental learning ‘communities’ (Remmik et al., 2011; Sutherland, 2018).

Accordingly, our collaborative ‘expansive learning’ (Engeström, 2001) engendered through discerning the tensions and contradictions evident in the induction-to-teaching ‘activity system’ has enabled us to influence institutional change from the bottom up (Liebowitz, 2014). By developing ‘mediating tools’ and ‘rules’, we have enhanced the induction-to-teaching process at the departmental level and influenced the process within the wider institution.

Future research should evaluate the impact of the changes made to the induction-to-teaching experiences of new academics and, consequently, the learning experiences of students. A further contradiction which has not been explored in this study, but which could yield valuable insights, is the contradiction between the activity systems representing the academic developers’ work and participants’ home departments; this needs further examination through drawing on Engeström’s (2001) third generation CHAT which engages with contradictions within and between multiple ‘activity systems’. We are also keen to examine how changes resulting from our research can influence upwards to senior managers and across to ‘activity systems’ for research, since our research highlighted that the contradictions of induction-to-teaching cannot be addressed by academic developers alone.

**Limitations**

The use of the CHAT framework within this study is not without its limitations and has seen notable critique (e.g., Engeström, 2008; Van Eijck & Roth, 2007). While offering an effective organising framework, it did not explicitly offer the theoretical constructs or concepts to explain the phenomena being examined; these had to be discerned from elsewhere, for example, from the literature on academic identities (e.g., Barnett & DiNapoli, 2008). However, CHAT is practice based and practice oriented, and its use has challenged us to move beyond merely identifying induction-to-teaching experiences to develop interventions to enhance the process.

**Conclusions**

The study has examined the induction-to-teaching experiences of new academics in a case-study Northern England university. Using a CHAT framework has challenged us to move from the abstract to the concrete (Sannino, 2011) to revisit our ‘transformative agency’ (Virkkunen, 2006) as academic developers. In working collaboratively across disciplinary and institutional boundaries, we have transformed our understanding of the
‘activity system’ for induction-to-teaching (Engeström, 2001; Virkkunen, 2006), broadening our understanding of commonalities and diversity in the experiences of new academics. This changed understanding has enabled us to enhance the induction-to-teaching process. We have developed interventions and institutional guidelines that convert the valued informal practices of some disciplines into new ‘rules’ and ‘resources’ across the University. We have also consolidated induction practices across departments and centrally. These initiatives respond to the experiences and expressed needs of academic ‘subjects’ for their induction-to-teaching.

Disclosure statement

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