Reframing academic mentoring using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT): foregrounding sociocultural and structural aspects of induction to teaching

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Abstract

Amanda Hlengwa's Thinkpiece raises important questions about the limits of academic mentoring in transforming South African Higher Education (HE). She argues that while nGAP is positioned as a transformation mechanism supporting black and women academics through mentoring, its impact is limited, because mentoring is largely by white male academics, and does not challenge existing conceptions of HE.

This paper argues that Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engestrom 2001) can illuminate both the sociocultural and structural elements shaping mentoring, by locating mentoring in the broader 'activity systems' for induction to teaching. At the same time, CHAT surfaces contradictions in 'activity systems', that can generate proposals for change.

This paper draws on research in a UK university that identified the 'third space' (Bhabha 1992) tensions between teaching and research (Mathieson 2019) experienced by new academics', and how these influenced their induction to teaching, in a performative HE culture. Here we focus in particular on the light CHAT sheds on academic experiences of mentoring and community support for teaching. Through examining contradictions that surfaced through a CHAT analysis, we identified ways to enhance mentoring and communities supporting teaching.

Because of its capacity to analyse individual, collective and structural issues and contradictions in 'activity systems' as they develop historically over time, CHAT could be a valuable theoretical tool in expanding understandings of mentoring for new academics in the contested space of South African HE. It could broaden the focus from individual mentoring relationships, to incorporate the wider 'activity systems' in which mentoring happens. It could also shed light on race, gender and cultural bias in the academic practices that new staff are inducted into, while recognising the agency of academics, both individually and collectively, in challenging these cultural biases (Hlengwa 2020). We found Bhabha's concept of 'third space' useful in understanding the painful, but creative spaces new academics struggled with in negotiating their identities between research and teaching: this concept could shed further light on tensions and contradictions of race, gender and culture.

References

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Key words

Induction, mentoring, CHAT, third space, communities of practice