# Reimagining academic staff development through game-based learning as decolonial reflective praxis in the Global South

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ABSTRACT

Academic staff development and induction workshops in the Global South are often presented as procedural engagements with teaching and learning, institutional systems, policies, and performance expectations. However, in contexts such as South Africa, shaped by colonial legacies, apartheid histories, and ongoing structural inequalities, these workshops are not a neutral process of professional socialisation but rather a formative site where epistemic assumptions and institutional norms are either reproduced or contested. This article argues that academic staff development should be reimagined as a form of decolonial reflective praxis that emphasises relational accountability and critical engagement with structural inequality. The research question that guided the study was: What does academic staff engagement with Game-Based Learning (GBL) reveal about critical reflection on student success, structural inequality and professional responsibility? Drawing on a reflexive practitioner inquiry, the study examined staff engagements through a GBL intervention implemented during an academic staff development workshop. Using the Finish Line board game as a mediating artefact, 30 academic staff from across disciplines, who participants at the workshop, engaged with simulated student trajectories influenced by financial, institutional, and socio-cultural constraints. The analysis, based on the facilitators' field notes and reflective dialogues, identified the following key patterns: the disruption of deficit framings, the negotiation of resistance and discomfort, and the reconfiguration of academic responsibility towards more relational and systemic understandings. The findings demonstrate that GBL can serve as a dialogical and disruptive pedagogical space, allowing academics to critically interrogate assumptions about student success, institutional accountability, and their own professional identities. Nonetheless, the persistent influence of meritocratic and disciplinary narratives highlights the limitations and tensions inherent in such processes. The article contributes to scholarship on academic staff development by illustrating how staff

development and induction workshops can transcend compliance-oriented training to become a site of epistemic disruption, reflexive engagement, and ethical reorientation within higher education in the Global South.

**Keywords:** Game-based Learning (GBL), academic induction, professional development, decolonial praxis, academic developers, Global south

## INTRODUCTION

Academic induction programmes are commonly framed as a supportive mechanism that introduce new academics to institutional policies, performance expectations, and pedagogical frameworks. Within higher education institutions, such programmes are typically designed to familiarise new staff with teaching and learning practices, quality assurance processes, and institutional expectations for research and academic engagement. However, within the Global South, and particularly in South Africa, academic induction takes place within universities that remain shaped by colonial epistemologies, apartheid legacies, and persistent structural inequalities (Heleta 2016). The socialisation of academics into these institutions is therefore not merely an administrative process but a formative one, influencing how academics understand knowledge, authority, merit, professionalism, and their responsibilities toward increasingly diverse student populations.

South African higher education has undergone significant transformation since the end of apartheid, yet structural inequalities continue to shape student participation and success (Council on Higher Education 2013; Case, Marshall and Linder 2010). Universities have been tasked with widening access while simultaneously improving student success rates in contexts characterised by socio-economic inequality, linguistic diversity, and uneven educational preparation. These challenges require academics to engage with complex questions about pedagogy, equity, and institutional responsibility. Academic development programmes therefore play a critical role in shaping how academics respond to the challenges of teaching in diverse higher education environments, as they influence the pedagogical assumptions and institutional cultures within which teaching and learning occur (Boughey and McKenna 2016). Despite national commitments to transformation and social justice, many academic development programmes continue to privilege managerial priorities such as compliance, efficiency, and standardised quality assurance (Boughey and McKenna 2016). Such approaches risk reinforcing what Aníbal Quijano conceptualises as the coloniality of power, in which hierarchical systems of knowledge, authority, and institutional organisation continue to shape social institutions long after the formal end of colonial rule (Quijano 2007). Within higher education, these hierarchies may manifest through dominant disciplinary traditions,

language practices, and institutional cultures that privilege certain forms of knowledge while marginalising others (Heleta 2016). Academic induction, when reduced to procedural orientation, may therefore inadvertently reproduce these hierarchies by socialising new staff into institutional practices that remain largely unexamined.

Reimagining academic induction in the Global South, therefore, requires more than curricular redesign; it demands a reorientation of purpose. Induction must become a site of critical formation in which academic staff are invited to interrogate their positionality, confront institutional inequities, and cultivate relational accountability toward students whose educational journeys are shaped by structural constraints. Such a shift aligns with scholarship on student success that emphasises the importance of institutional cultures, teaching practices, and social integration in shaping student persistence and achievement (Kuh et al 2005; Tinto 1993). In the South African context, addressing inequities in higher education requires critical engagement with the epistemological assumptions that underpin teaching, curriculum design, and assessment practices (Luckett and Shay 2020).

This article argues that academic induction can function as a form of decolonial reflective praxis when deliberately designed to disrupt professional neutrality and foreground contextual realities. We examine a Game-Based Learning (GBL) intervention implemented within an academic staff development workshop at a South African university. While GBL is often associated with engagement and innovation in teaching and learning, its value in academic staff development lies in its capacity to create dialogical spaces where discomfort, resistance, and reflexivity can emerge (Whitton 2018). By analysing our facilitation of The Finish Line board game and our reflexive engagement with participants' responses, we explore how playful pedagogical design can destabilise dominant narratives about students and reposition academic responsibility within structurally unequal systems.

In doing so, the article contributes to debates on academic induction praxis in the Global South by demonstrating how staff development can move beyond procedural compliance toward ethically grounded, context-sensitive engagement. Rather than positioning academics solely as transmitters of disciplinary knowledge, the study foregrounds them as subjects who are both implicated in, and capable of transforming, institutional cultures that shape student success.

## REVIEWED LITERATURE

### Academic staff development as epistemic formation

Academic staff development is often framed as a process of professional integration into established norms of learning, teaching, and scholarship within higher education institutions. However, such processes can also be understood through the lens of Bourdieu's (1990) theory of social practice, particularly the concepts of field, habitus, and capital. The field represents a relatively autonomous social space governed by its own rules, power relations, and forms of legitimacy. In the context of this study, the field refers to the higher education environment, where academic work is shaped by institutional norms, disciplinary traditions, and professional expectations (Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu and Johnson 1993).

Within this field, individuals develop forms of habitus, understood as socially and historically conditioned dispositions that shape how individuals perceive, think, and act within particular contexts (Bourdieu 1990). Habitus is closely linked to various economic, cultural, and social factors that influence how individuals navigate institutional environments and exercise agency within them. In universities, these forms of capital may include disciplinary expertise, institutional knowledge, academic networks, and familiarity with dominant pedagogical practices.

Academic staff development can therefore be understood as a process of habitus formation, through which academics internalise institutional logics, disciplinary hierarchies, and tacit expectations regarding teaching and scholarship. Within higher education systems shaped by colonial and apartheid histories, however, these logics are not neutral; rather they reflect historically sedimented assumptions about whose knowledge counts, whose language is legitimate, and whose academic trajectories are considered normative (Boughey and McKenna 2016; Heleta 2016). South African scholars have argued that universities continue to reproduce epistemic hierarchies rooted in colonial knowledge systems, even as they pursue transformation agendas (Leibowitz, Bozalek and Kahn 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

While Bourdieu's framework helps explain how institutional practices reproduce advantage and shape academic dispositions, it does not fully account for the colonial and apartheid histories that continue to structure South African higher education. A decolonial reading is therefore necessary, but it must be grounded in the specific complexities of the post-apartheid university. Pillay (2024) cautions against reducing decolonisation to racial representation or adopting decolonial theory without sufficient attention to local intellectual, historical, and institutional conditions. His work highlights the difficult relationship between decolonisation and deracialisation, as well as the risks of reproducing fixed racial categories or

externally derived frameworks when analysing knowledge and identity in South African universities.

From this perspective, academic staff development plays a vital role in shaping academics' understanding of their professional identities and responsibilities. As Boughey and McKenna (2016) argue, academic development is not merely a technical process of enhancing teaching skills but also a social and epistemic practice that influences how academics interpret institutional norms and student learning. In contexts characterised by ongoing inequalities, such as South Africa, academic development programmes must therefore critically engage with the structural conditions that influence both teaching and student success.

Reimagining academic staff development involves recognising it as a space of epistemic formation, where academic identities and pedagogical commitments are actively shaped. The question shifts from "How do we prepare academics to meet institutional standards?" to "How do we cultivate academics capable of critically engaging with the ethical, historical, and structural aspects of their practice?" This transition aligns with broader calls for the transformation and decolonisation of higher education in the Global South, which emphasise the need to question dominant epistemologies and institutional cultures (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Luckett and Shay 2020).

In Menon's (2024) study on humanising academic staff development, the author emphasises that discussions of humanising pedagogies often overlook academics' own experiences. The study argues for a more purposeful focus on humanising participants in academic development processes, contending that transformation initiatives are unlikely to succeed unless they meaningfully engage with the histories, identities, and lived experiences that academics bring to the university. This view suggests that academic staff development must recognise that academics enter institutions with diverse social and intellectual backgrounds that shape their teaching practices, professional identities, and involvement in institutional transformation. Acknowledging these complexities is key to fostering genuine change in higher education settings characterised by historical inequality (Menon 2024).

## Decolonial praxis and critical consciousness

A decolonial approach goes beyond merely including diverse content in curricula to explore the deeper historical and structural forces that uphold inequality within higher education institutions. Instead of just diversifying course materials, decolonisation critically examines how colonial knowledge systems continue to influence institutional cultures, epistemic hierarchies, and teaching and learning practices (Heleta 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). In the

Global South, these debates have been especially prominent in the 2015 and 2016 student protests, such as *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall* in South Africa, which challenged the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge traditions and called for the transformation of universities to recognise indigenous knowledge systems, African languages, and traditionally marginalised intellectual traditions (Heleta 2016; Luckett and Shay 2020).

At the heart of these discussions is the understanding that knowledge creation in universities has historically prioritised Western epistemologies while marginalising other forms of knowledge rooted in local histories and lived experiences. The challenge of altering knowledge hierarchies in higher education, according to Santos (2014), has been understood through the idea of "epistemologies of the South", which highlights the recognition of diverse knowledge traditions arising from communities that have faced historical oppression and social struggles. From this viewpoint, decolonisation involves not only curricular reform but also the transformation of institutional cultures and practices that sustain epistemic inequality (Santos 2014).

Within academic staff development, a decolonial praxis therefore involves cultivating critical reflection that enables academics to recognise how institutional structures shape teaching practices and student experiences. The concept of critical consciousness is particularly relevant in this regard, as it describes the capacity to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to act against oppressive elements of reality (Freire 1970). Applied to academic development, this perspective frames induction not as a technical process of learning institutional procedures, but as a dialogical process linking reflection and action. It encourages academics to critically examine how institutional policies, assessment practices, and pedagogical norms may perpetuate inequalities, and to reflect on their own roles within these systems.

In the South African higher education context, scholars have argued that academic development initiatives must explicitly engage with these structural and historical dynamics to contribute meaningfully to institutional transformation (Boughey and McKenna 2016; Leibowitz 2017). Academic staff development programmes that centre critical dialogue, reflexivity, and contextual awareness can create opportunities for academics to interrogate the assumptions underlying their pedagogical practices and disciplinary traditions.

Crucially, decolonial praxis is not a fixed outcome but an ongoing process marked by tension, uncertainty, and incompleteness. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argues that decolonisation requires confronting deeply embedded epistemic hierarchies and acknowledging the persistence of coloniality within contemporary institutions. This process inevitably involves

moments of discomfort, resistance, and critical reflection. For academic staff, engaging in decolonial praxis therefore entails recognising that teaching and assessment are not merely technical activities, but ethical and political practices embedded within broader histories of power, inequality, and knowledge production.

## Play as dialogical disruption in academic development

Game-Based Learning (GBL) is frequently celebrated for its capacity to enhance student engagement and motivation through interactive and experiential pedagogies (Whitton 2018). However, within the context of academic staff development, its value extends beyond engagement to its potential as a disruptive pedagogical strategy. Rather than functioning merely as a tool for entertainment, play can create a liminal pedagogical space in which hierarchical roles are softened, assumptions are surfaced, and alternative perspectives can be explored (Freire 1970). Through narrative immersion and scenario-based simulation, participants are invited to engage with complex realities and to inhabit perspectives that challenge taken-for-granted norms about students, teaching, and institutional responsibility.

In the context of this study, the Finish Line board game functioned as a mediating artefact through which academic staff encountered simulated student journeys shaped by financial precarity, bureaucratic constraints, and institutional expectations. The use of simulation aligns with experiential learning theory, which suggests that learning is deepened when participants engage in concrete experiences followed by reflection (Kolb and Kolb 2005). Importantly, the playful structure did not trivialise these realities; rather, it rendered them visible and open to critical interrogation. By embedding structural inequities within the mechanics of the game, participants were able to experience how seemingly minor institutional processes accumulate into significant barriers to student success.

This form of engagement resonates with South African scholarship on student success, which emphasises that student trajectories are shaped not only by individual effort but also by systemic and structural conditions within higher education (Boughey and McKenna 2016). By simulating these conditions, the game enabled participants to move beyond deficit understandings of students toward a more structural awareness of inequality.

Play thus functioned as a dialogical device aligned with decolonial praxis, creating space for critical reflection and relational engagement. In line with Freire's (1970) notion of dialogical pedagogy, the activity facilitated conversations in which participants could interrogate their assumptions and engage with alternative interpretations of student experience. Within the South African context, such dialogical engagement is particularly important for

addressing the legacy of epistemic inequality and institutional exclusion (Heleta 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

At the same time, the activity generated moments of discomfort, resistance, and defensiveness among participants. These responses are significant, as they reveal the depth of institutional socialisation and the persistence of dominant narratives about merit, responsibility, and academic standards. As Jones (2009) suggests, higher education spaces that foster critical engagement often involve uncertainty, discomfort, and disruption; rather than being problematic, such tensions can be understood as productive moments that signal engagement with complex and contested issues.

These insights suggest that GBL, when intentionally framed within a critical and decolonial agenda, can function as more than a pedagogical innovation; it can serve as a transformative space for interrogating institutional assumptions, challenging deficit discourses, and rethinking academic responsibility. In this sense, play becomes not an escape from reality but a means of engaging more deeply with the structural conditions that shape teaching and learning in higher education. This positions academic induction as a dialogical and transformative process rather than a procedural orientation into institutional norms.

## METHODOLOGY: REFLEXIVE PRACTITIONER INQUIRY AS DECOLONIAL PRAXIS

### Research design: Reflexive practitioner inquiry

In this study, we adopted a reflexive practitioner inquiry approach, rooted in traditions of critical reflective practice. Rather than viewing researchers as detached observers, we treated academic induction as both a pedagogical intervention and a site of inquiry. Reflexive practitioner inquiry acknowledges that academic development is not neutral but a socially situated and power-related practice shaped by institutional contexts and relationships (Brookfield 2017; Schön 1992).

As the two facilitators embedded within institutional structures, we recognise our positionality and complicity in the systems we seek to critique. With one of the facilitators being an academic development practioner and the other a data analyst, we were mindful of treating reflexivity as both an epistemic and ethical practice, involving ongoing critical examination of how our assumptions, identities, and facilitation choices shape the learning environment and the knowledge produced (Cunliffe 2004). This aligns with decolonial approaches to research, which reject claims of objective, detached knowledge and instead emphasise the situated and relational nature of knowledge production (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

The aim of this approach is not to produce generalisable findings but to highlight how academic induction can serve as a site for epistemic disruption and critical reflection when deliberately designed as decolonial praxis. In addressing the following research question: "What does academic staff engagement with Game-Based Learning reveal about critical reflection on student success, structural inequality and professional responsibility", the workshop became a space for the participants through GBL to challenge institutional norms and rethink academic responsibilities in contexts marked by inequality and historical exclusion.

## Context and intervention

The study was conducted during an academic staff development workshop at a South African university, regarded as a Historically Disadvantaged Institution (HDI), during an in-house academic learning and teaching conference. The workshop aimed to create a reflective space for participants to critically explore issues of student success, equity, and institutional responsibility in higher education. A total of 30 staff members attended the workshop, which formed the participants of the study. The participants came from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and had varying levels of teaching experience, providing a range of perspectives on student learning and support.

The central pedagogical intervention was The Finish Line board game, a scenario-based GBL tool designed to simulate student journeys through higher education. The aim of the game was to raise awareness of how structural, institutional, and socio-economic factors influence student progression and success, especially for historically marginalised groups. Through interactive play, participants engaged with fictional student personas and encountered challenges such as financial insecurity, language barriers, administrative complexities, and unequal access to institutional resources. The purpose of the board game was not competition but critical engagement, encouraging participants to analyse how systemic conditions affect student outcomes and to reflect on their own roles in supporting equitable success in higher education.

The Finish Line game set includes a board, student persona cards, and scenario prompts that guide participants through simulated academic journeys. Divided into six small groups with five participants per group, participants collaboratively navigated these scenarios, making decisions and responding to challenges embedded within the game mechanics. This design encouraged participants to explore how seemingly minor institutional processes can accumulate into significant barriers to student success.

The two-hour workshop was divided into three parts. It began with a facilitated introduction of the Finish Line game rules, and a brief framing of play as a pedagogical tool situated within broader discussions of equity, student success, and institutional accountability in the South African higher education context. This was followed by the second phase in which participants played the game in small groups. The participants directly engaged with the scenarios and reflected on their implications. This generated robust discussions as the participants played the game and addressed the scenarios. During this phase the observers, also the facilitators and researchers, walked around the room and observed the engagements, discussions, gestures and words used. The workshop concluded with the third phase being a plenary reflective session, led by the facilitators. During this session participants shared insights and considered the activity's implications for their teaching practices and institutional roles.

The design of the intervention deliberately emphasised dialogic engagement, emotional reflection, and critical questioning rather than prescriptive instruction. By fostering a collaborative and relatively informal environment, the workshop allowed participants to explore sensitive and complex issues surrounding inequality, privilege, and institutional culture. In this way, the board game served as a mediating instrument to promote critical reflection and to reveal assumptions about students and academic practice within higher education.

## DATA SOURCES

In line with the reflexive practitioner inquiry approach, no formal participant data (such as interviews, surveys, or recordings) were gathered. This choice was deliberate ensuring that the workshop remained a developmental, dialogical space rather than an evaluative research environment, aligning with methods that emphasise relational engagement and reduce extractive research practices (Cunliffe 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

Instead, the analysis relied on facilitator-generated data, including: (1) field notes recorded immediately after the two-hour workshop, capturing key interactions during the session, the six group feedback responses, and moments of tension or insight; (2) critical incident reflections, where facilitators identified and examined pedagogically significant moments; and (3) structured dialogue debrief conversations conducted during phase three of the session, focusing on our interpretations, assumptions, and emotional responses to the workshop.

These materials are understood not as objective representations of participant experience, but as situated, interpretive accounts shaped by our positionality as facilitators embedded within institutional contexts. This approach reflects a decolonial methodological stance that recognises knowledge as relational, partial, and produced through reflexive engagement rather than detached observation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). In this sense, the data sources foreground facilitator reflexivity as a legitimate site of inquiry into academic development practice.

## Reflexive analytic process

The analytic process unfolded in three iterative and reflexive stages (Cunliffe 2004):

### *Stage 1: Descriptive reconstruction*

We initially reconstructed the sequence of workshop events from field notes, focusing on moments that seemed to interrupt standard professional discourse. Particular attention was paid to:

- Expressions of defensiveness or distancing.
- Attributions of responsibility (student vs institutional).
- Language reflecting deficit or structural framings.
- Emotional responses (e.g., laughter, discomfort, silence).
- This stage remained primarily descriptive to avoid premature theorisation.

### *Stage 2: Thematic interpretation*

In the second stage, we engaged in collaborative thematic analysis, guided by our theoretical framework of decolonial praxis and academic formation. We asked:

- What assumptions about students were being surfaced or challenged?
- How did participants position themselves in relation to institutional structures?
- Where did professional neutrality appear to be unsettled?
- How did resistance manifest?

Through iterative dialogue, we identified recurring analytic patterns, including:

- Disruption of deficit framings
- Negotiation of institutional accountability
- Emotional discomfort as epistemic opening
- Reassertion of disciplinary authority

Themes were not imposed deductively but emerged through sustained engagement with the reflexive material and were subsequently interpreted through a decolonial lens.

### *Stage 3: Reflexive interrogation of facilitator positioning*

A critical component of the analysis involved interrogating our own role in shaping the workshop dynamics. We examined:

- How our framing of the board game influenced participant responses.
- Whether moments of resistance were productively engaged or prematurely contained.
- How our institutional positions may have constrained or enabled critical dialogue.
- Where we may have inadvertently reinforced dominant narratives.

This stage aligns with the decolonial imperative to examine complicity within systems of power rather than positioning oneself as an external critic. It also acknowledges that academic development interventions are co-constructed spaces shaped by facilitator authority, participant histories, and institutional culture.

## Ethical considerations

Although no formal data collection took place, ethical considerations remained at the core. The workshop was explicitly presented as a developmental space rather than a research activity. In writing this article, we avoid attributing statements to specific individuals or groups and instead focus on thematic patterns and critical moments. The reflexive methodology itself embodies an ethical stance: it challenges extractive research methods by emphasising facilitator accountability and interpretive responsibility. At the same time, we recognise the limitations of this approach. The absence of participant voices in direct quotations reduces the depth of evidence for our claims and calls for careful, non-generalising interpretation.

## Methodological contribution

By emphasising reflexive practitioner inquiry within academic staff development, this methodology reconceptualises induction as a site of knowledge creation rather than mere dissemination. It illustrates how decolonial praxis can be enacted not only through curriculum reform but also via the critical analysis of professional formation processes. This methodological stance aligns with a Global South commitment to contextually rooted scholarship that values situated insight over universalising claims. It positions academic development as a reflexive, relational, and politically conscious practice.

## ANALYSIS: ACADEMIC STAFF ENGAGEMENT IN GBL

The analysis does not focus on measuring attitudinal change but rather on examining how academic subjectivities are negotiated within the workshop space. The Game-Based Learning intervention served as a mediating artefact through which implicit assumptions emerged, institutional logics were rendered, and moments of tension arose. Four interconnected themes highlight how academic induction can become a space for decolonial reflective praxis.

### Disrupting professional neutrality: From traditional delivery to relational accountability

Our field notes show that early in gameplay, participants tended to view the simulated student scenarios through a procedural, compliance-focused lens. Initial discussions often centred on whether the fictional students had followed institutional expectations, such as adhering to correct procedures, submitting documentation on time, or meeting academic standards. This perspective reflected a familiar professional discourse in which responsibility for student success is primarily placed on the individual, consistent with dominant institutional logics of merit and accountability.

As gameplay "progressed", structural constraints such as financial instability, administrative delays, and language barriers prompted a re-evaluation of this framing. Reflections shifted from individual explanations to understanding how institutional conditions shape student pathways. One participant captured this movement by identifying a "barrier to learning" while also recognising the need to "adjust/think creatively". In one instance, blame for registration delays shifted from poor planning to a nuanced discussion of multiple embedded barriers. The tone shifted from judgement to inquiry as participants questioned institutional systems and assumptions.

From a reflective analytical perspective, this shift reveals a disruption in what could be called professional neutrality, the idea that academic roles are mainly technical, objective, and separate from broader structural inequalities. The game served as a mediating tool that emphasised the relational and cumulative effects of institutional processes. Instead of viewing equity as an abstract or external concern, participants recognised how inequality is woven into the daily mechanics of progression. Participants' feedback reflections foregrounded "positive lecturer engagement", timely feedback, awareness of services, and courage to ask for help when a student has a problem". In another discussion a participant linked student well-being to "self-manage burnout and the need for support".

Our reflections also show that this shift was neither straightforward nor uncontested. The observed moments of hesitation, defensiveness, and attempts to reassert individual responsibility, suggested the persistence of deeply entrenched institutional narratives. While reflecting on our facilitation, we realised how our framing might have either facilitated or limited the exploration of these tensions. These dynamics demonstrate that such disruptions are co-created within the workshop's interactional space and are influenced by both participant responses and the way facilitators position themselves.

Overall, this implies that the intervention established conditions in which academic responsibility began to be redefined not just in terms of content delivery or procedural compliance, but as a form of relational and systemic accountability. This shift is important because it challenges common assumptions about neutrality in academic practice and creates opportunities for more contextually responsive and ethically grounded approaches to teaching and learning. This relational dimension is reflected in participants' emphasis on "learning from others, social engagement, and awareness of the contexts that influence learning".

## Negotiating discomfort and resistance: The limits of decolonial conversation

Our field notes and post-session reflections show that not all participant responses moved toward structural critique. Moments of resistance appeared across several groups, revealing the depth of institutional socialisation and the persistence of dominant academic discourses. In some cases, structural barriers embedded in the game were seen as inevitable constraints of a "large system," thereby reaffirming limits on institutional responsibility and subtly shifting challenges outside the scope of academic intervention. Similarly, there were moments when maintaining academic standards was emphasised, alongside concerns that a greater focus on structural inequalities might compromise notions of rigour and merit.

From an analytical perspective, these responses were not regarded as deviations but as constructive tensions within the learning process. Our critical incident reflections indicate that such moments highlighted the friction between meritocratic narratives, centred on individual responsibility and academic standards; and structural understandings of inequality. This tension was particularly evident in discussions where the role of the academic was viewed as either a disciplinary expert or a socially responsive educator. One participant noted that "*no* agency makes it difficult for students to ask for help or seek help", while another comment also associated support-seeking with "taking responsibility". In these exchanges, discomfort became evident through shifts in tone, hesitation, and instances where participants distanced themselves from broader institutional critiques.

Our reflexive engagement as facilitators further exposed the intricacies of managing these moments. Field notes recorded our realisation of an initial urge to clarify, correct, or direct discussions towards structural explanations. However, consistent with a reflexive and dialogical pedagogical approach, we deliberately chose to keep these tensions unresolved, enabling participants to voice and explore conflicting perspectives. This approach aligns with a praxis-based view of learning, where discomfort is recognised as a necessary condition for critical reflection rather than something to be hastily resolved.

Importantly, these moments of resistance and defensiveness can be seen as indicators of deeply rooted epistemic commitments shaped by institutional cultures and professional socialisation. From a decolonial perspective, such responses do not signify failure but instead reveal how dominant assumptions about knowledge, neutrality, and academic responsibility are embedded in higher education practices. Our analysis shows that it is precisely during these moments of discomfort that the potential for epistemic disruption arises.

Overall, this demonstrates both the limitations and possibilities of decolonial dialogue within academic development contexts. While the intervention offered opportunities for critical reflection, it also exposed the restrictions imposed by entrenched institutional logics. These findings highlight that reimagining academic induction as decolonial praxis requires not only fostering reflection but also engaging with resistance as an essential and productive element of the learning journey.

## From deficit narratives to structural awareness

A recurring pattern identified in our field notes and critical incident reflections was the gradual shift away from deficit-oriented views of students. In the early stages of gameplay, participants often saw student difficulties through an individualised perspective, implicitly portraying students as lacking preparedness, resilience, or foresight. These interpretations matched familiar institutional discourses that assign responsibility for success mainly to the individual student.

However, as the scenarios evolved and structural constraints such as family responsibilities, transport disruptions, and inconsistent funding increased, this perspective became progressively difficult to sustain. Our observations reveal a clear shift in how participants perceived student experiences, with discussions shifting from individual judgement towards recognising the layered and systemic nature of disadvantage. This change was particularly evident in moments when repeated encounters with institutional barriers led participants to question the assumptions embedded within university systems. One participant

explicitly identified “use of resources” and “power dynamics” in relation to students seeking help from peers, indicating attention to the conditions that shape whether support is accessible and usable.

In one such instance recorded in our field notes, ongoing engagement with bureaucratic delays prompted a broader reflection on how institutional processes assume stable access to time, technology, and administrative literacy. This marked a shift from assessing student competence to questioning institutional design. Participants began to raise implicit questions about who the “ideal student” is within higher education systems and whose circumstances are normalised within policy and practice. A participant’s observation that barriers to learning require institutions to “create more flexibility” further reflects this shift from student deficit to institutional responsiveness.

From a reflexive analytic perspective, this discursive shift indicates a move from individualised explanations towards a broader understanding of structure, consistent with Stage 2 of our analytic process. Drawing on Quijano’s (2007) concept of the coloniality of power, these moments can be seen as instances where participants began to recognise how institutional norms advantage certain social positions while marginalising others. The game created a boundary space where these dynamics could be surfaced indirectly, enabling critique to emerge through engagement with the simulation rather than through direct confrontation.

Simultaneously, our reflexive notes indicate that this shift was emergent and contingent rather than fully realised. Elements of deficit thinking persisted alongside structural interpretations, demonstrating the coexistence of competing epistemic frameworks. As facilitators, we recognised how our framing of the activity and responses to participant contributions shaped the extent to which structural explanations were examined or limited. This reflexive awareness highlights that the movement towards structural understanding was not solely driven by participants but co-constructed within the pedagogical space.

Overall, this shows how the intervention prompted moments of epistemic reorientation, during which dominant deficit narratives were challenged, and alternative ways of understanding student experiences emerged. Instead of imposing structural critique, the activity allowed participants to gain these insights through collective engagement, highlighting the potential of game-based learning as a tool for critical reflection on inequality in higher education.

## Reconfiguring Academic Identity: Toward Ethical Academic Citizenship

Our field notes and plenary reflections show that as the workshop progressed, participants began to describe their academic roles in broader, more relational terms. Discussions shifted from a narrow focus on curriculum delivery and content expertise to include early intervention, empathetic engagement, and advocacy within departmental and institutional frameworks. A clear change in discourse was observed, where the language of individual ownership often centred around "my module" or isolated teaching duties sometimes gave way to a more collective approach to student progression and shared responsibility. This shift was reflected in participants feedback that foregrounded "positive lecturer engagement, timely feedback, and awareness of available services as part of the student learning experience ".

From an analytical perspective, this shift did not constitute a uniform or complete transformation but rather an emergent reconfiguration of academic identity. Our reflections suggest that participants were negotiating alternative ways of understanding their roles, prompted by the tensions surfaced during the gameplay. In several instances, participants appeared to contrast these emerging perspectives with prior experiences of academic induction, which had emphasised research productivity, performance metrics, and procedural compliance. The workshop, by contrast, created space for considering academic work as relational and contextually embedded. For example, one participant highlighted the value of "engaging CoP, and share knowledge", while another connected effective teaching with "practical knowledge, real-life context, and industry".

Importantly, this reconfiguration unfolded unevenly and remained provisional. Moments of openness to more relational and socially responsive forms of academic practice coexisted with residual commitments to established norms of disciplinary authority and individual responsibility. This coexistence reflects the complexity of academic identity formation within institutional contexts shaped by competing demands and historically sedimented expectations. Participant reflections similarly emphasised both student agency and institutional responsibility, noting the importance of "students taking responsibility and the role of lecturer engagement, support, and a good learning environment".

From a reflexive standpoint, we also recognised how our facilitation shaped the conditions under which these rearticulations became possible. Our framing of the activity around student experience and structural constraints appeared to invite broader considerations of academic responsibility, while the workshop's dialogical structure enabled participants to test and negotiate these emerging positions. At the same time, we remain attentive to how our

own positionality and assumptions may have influenced which perspectives were foregrounded and how far such reconfigurations could be explored.

This highlights the potential of academic induction as a formative space for rethinking academic identity, not merely as a process of assimilation into existing institutional norms but as an opportunity to question and reshape those norms. The importance of this shift lies not in adopting a fixed alternative model but in challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about merit, neutrality, and professional distance. In this way, the intervention creates space to imagine ethical academic citizenship grounded in relational accountability and responsiveness to the structural conditions that affect student success.

## DISCUSSION: REIMAGINING ACADEMIC INDUCTION PRAXIS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

This study presents academic induction in the Global South as a space for epistemic and professional development, rather than merely a procedural tool for institutional compliance. The findings show that when induction is deliberately designed as a dialogical and reflexive environment, it can challenge dominant assumptions about teaching and learning, student success, and academic responsibility. This supports scholarship that views academic development as a socially rooted practice that influences how academics interpret institutional norms and address different student contexts (Boughey and McKenna 2016; Leibowitz et al 2016).

The results show a shift in participants' thinking, initially much of the conversation relied on meritocratic ideas of student success, aligned with higher education discourses emphasising personal responsibility and standards (Tinto 1993). As the board game progressed, these ideas and thoughts were challenged. Our reflections point to a shift towards recognising the effects of structural constraints such as financial insecurity, administrative obstacles, and limited access to resources. This shift from deficit explanations to systemic awareness aligns with broader calls in South African higher education to reframe student success in terms of structural inequality rather than individual shortcomings (Case et al 2010; Luckett and Shay 2020).

This shift was neither linear nor uncontested, showing resistance and reassertion of authority, reflecting deep institutional logics. These tensions align with Quijano's (2007) concept of the coloniality of power, in which hierarchical knowledge and meritocratic ideas continue to influence academia. From a decolonial perspective, resistance signals deep epistemic conditioning rather than an obstacle to change (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

The findings also demonstrate the pedagogical potential of Game-Based Learning as a disruptive and dialogic tool within academic staff development. Rather than merely increasing engagement, the game created a liminal space where professional neutrality was unsettled and institutional assumptions became visible. This supports arguments that experiential and playful pedagogies can promote critical reflection by allowing participants to encounter complex systems in embodied and relational ways (Whitton 2018). In this study, the game served as a mediating artefact, enabling participants to move beyond abstract discussions of equity towards situated engagement with students' lived realities.

A key contribution of this study is its demonstration of how academic induction can assist in redefining academic identity. The facilitators' reflections indicated a shift from individualised notions of teaching responsibility to more relational and collective perspectives on academic work. This aligns with emerging scholarship urging academics to act ethically within systems of inequality, rather than merely as neutral transmitters of disciplinary knowledge (Leibowitz et al 2016). However, this redefinition remained partial and tentative, highlighting the complexity of negotiating professional identity within institutional contexts shaped by competing demands and historical legacies.

Methodologically, the study advances research in academic development by emphasising reflexive practitioner inquiry as a decolonial approach. By prioritising the facilitators' reflections over participant data collection, the study aligns with calls to reconsider research practices that emphasise relational accountability and contextual engagement (Cunliffe 2004). This approach also underscores the co-constructed nature of academic development spaces, where learning emerges through interaction, tension, and reflexive dialogue.

The findings indicate that rethinking academic induction in the Global South requires moving beyond compliance-focused models towards critical, contextually rooted, and dialogic approaches. Such methods enable academics to challenge their assumptions, address structural inequalities, and reconsider their roles within higher education systems.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that academic induction, when designed as a reflective and dialogical space, can serve as a powerful site for rethinking academic practice in contexts characterised by inequality and historical exclusion. Through a game-based intervention, the workshop created conditions in which dominant narratives of neutrality, merit, and individual responsibility were critically interrogated, and alternative understandings of academic responsibility began to emerge.

The findings indicate that academic staff development in the Global South must go beyond procedural and compliance-based training towards approaches that emphasise relational accountability, structural awareness, and ethical practice. Significantly, the study demonstrates that transformation does not occur through consensus or immediate change, but through continuous engagement with tension, discomfort, and contradiction.

Based on these findings, several key recommendations can be made:

- Universities should design academic staff induction programmes that explicitly focus on issues of equity, student success, and institutional accountability, rather than just policies and procedures. Induction should help academics examine their assumptions and position within wider systems of inequality.
- Incorporate dialogical and experiential pedagogies like Game-Based Learning, simulation, and scenario-based activities in staff development to promote embodied, reflective engagement with complex issues. These methods deepen understanding of student experiences and institutional dynamics.
- Rather than trying to eliminate discomfort or disagreement, academic development programmes should see resistance and tension as productive.
- Staff development should encourage academics to shift from individualised teaching and learning ideas to collective, relational approaches that recognise structural factors influencing student success.
- Academic developers should adopt reflective approaches that critically examine their own positionality, assumptions, and facilitation techniques. This is essential for aligning staff development with decolonial and transformative agendas.
- Policies and practices related to student success should be rooted in the historical and socio-economic realities of the Global South. This includes recognising how colonial legacies, inequality, and institutional structures influence student experiences and outcomes.

Reimagining academic induction and staff development in the Global South involves more than just redesigning programmes; it requires redefining the purpose of academic development itself. This study demonstrates that when induction is regarded as decolonial reflective praxis, it can generate critical spaces for questioning institutional norms, negotiating academic identities, and fostering more equitable teaching and learning practices. Although such transformation is inevitably partial and contested, it remains essential for developing higher education systems that address the realities of the students they serve.

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