Inducting academics into Learning Analytics in the Global South

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ABSTRACT

Learning Analytics (LA) has become embedded in global higher education policy discourses, yet in the Global South it remains entangled with the afterlives of coloniality, often reproducing technocratic logics of prediction, surveillance, and control. Such logics privilege Eurocentric epistemologies and risk reducing students and academics to data points, undermining the relational, contextual, and ethical dimensions of teaching and learning. Academic induction, currently framed in many South African universities as an administrative exercise, does little to prepare new academics to interrogate these dynamics critically.

This article reframes academic induction into LA as a decolonial praxis foregrounding epistemic plurality, relational ethics, and contextual responsiveness. Drawing on the New Academics Transitioning into Higher Education Project (NATHEP) as its project context, it argues that professional learning must move beyond technical competence towards reflexive, ethical, and critically informed engagement with datafication. Building on Mignolo's epistemic disobedience, Moten and Harney's fugitive planning, and Ramose's articulation of Ubuntu, the article develops a conceptual framework structured around three interdependent principles: ontological re-orientation, epistemic pluralism, and axiological commitment to uBuntu.

Through practices such as reflective dialogue, participatory dashboard design, and narrative inquiry, the framework repositions LA as a site of co-creation rather than compliance. This decolonial approach enables academics to recognise and contest epistemic injustices embedded in data systems, and to design learning environments rooted in belonging, relational accountability, and ethical use of student data. Reimagined thus, academic induction becomes an act of decolonial resistance supporting critical, caring, and socially just LA practices across South African higher education.

Keywords: Academic induction, learning analytics, decolonial theory, decolonisation, curriculum transformation

INTRODUCTION

Learning Analytics (LA) has become a dominant paradigm in higher education, positioning data as a central mechanism for understanding and improving teaching and learning. Institutions increasingly rely on dashboards, predictive models, and engagement metrics to inform decision-making and enhance student success. LA is defined as the "measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of data about learners and their contexts, for purposes of

understanding and optimising learning and the environments in which it occurs" (Long and Siemens 2011, 34). Yet this dominant conceptualisation obscures the contested and political nature of data extraction in the Global South. In South African higher education, LA is typically positioned as a developmental intervention to improve retention, performance, and engagement, and is used primarily to guide decision-making, conduct cohort analyses, and support students (Lemmens and Henn 2016; Molokeng 2021). Such applications reinforce LA's function as a performance management tool that renders students visible, comparable, and actionable, reducing complex learning processes to quantifiable indicators while privileging behavioural metrics over the relational and social dimensions of learning. Datafication does not mark a rupture from colonial forms of control but rather their evolution, in which techniques of categorisation and extraction are rearticulated through algorithmic infrastructures. LA, in this sense, does not simply observe learning but actively shapes what counts as knowledge, success, and risk, with significant implications for equity and epistemic justice.

Despite these insights, the integration of LA remains largely technocratic, particularly in how academics are inducted into these systems. Induction is typically framed as a procedural, technical process focused on familiarising staff with institutional technologies such as learning management systems (Sánchez-Tarazaga et al 2024; Behari-Leak and Ganas 2024). Often driven by human resources, these onboarding processes fail to engage the political nature of higher education or the epistemological assumptions embedded in LA (Behari-Leak and Ganas 2024; Behari-Leak and Sabata 2024). This matters because African universities remain shaped by colonial legacies, with many institutional structures transplanted from Western models and insufficiently recontextualised, producing ongoing crises of identity, relevance, and legitimacy alongside student alienation and marginalisation (Behari-Leak and Sabata 2024; Johnson and Mbah 2024).

Academics trained to use LA tools without interrogating their underlying assumptions risk becoming uncritical adopters of systems that reproduce existing inequalities (Stewart, et al. 2023). Academic induction is not a neutral onboarding exercise but a political, relational, and epistemological practice through which academics are socialised into the structural and cultural conditions of higher education (Mathieson 2011; Behari-Leak and Sabata 2024). As Sánchez-Tarazaga et al (2024) and Ravhuhali and Mboweni (2024) emphasise, induction must be contextually grounded in the social, historical, and institutional realities in which it operates. This reveals a significant gap in that while LA has been widely studied as a technical and pedagogical tool, little attention has been paid to how academics are epistemically and ethically inducted into datafied regimes (Guzmán-Valenzuela, et al. 2021).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The induction of academics into LA in higher education is predominantly framed as a neutral, data-driven solution to improving student success. Yet this technocratic orientation obscures the political, historical, and epistemic conditions that underpin data. In South African universities, LA systems increasingly function as instruments of performance management, rendering students visible, comparable, and actionable through processes of surveillance and categorisation. While these systems are widely adopted, the induction of academics into LA remains largely procedural and technical, focusing on tool usage rather than critical engagement with the colonial logics and power relations embedded in data infrastructures. This results in a critical disjuncture: academics are socialised into datafied institutional environments without the epistemic resources to interrogate how LA shapes knowledge, subjectivity, and practice. Consequently, academic induction risks reproducing a form of coloniality, where academics become uncritical intermediaries of metric-driven governance, reinforcing deficit framings and obscuring the relational and contextual dimensions of learning. The problem, therefore, is not only the uncritical adoption of Learning Analytics but also the absence of a decolonial and relational framework for inducting academics into these systems.

Research Objective

The objective of this article is to reimagine the induction of academics into LA as a decolonial and ethical praxis of professional development within South African higher education. Rather than viewing induction as a procedural or technical exercise, the article positions it as a site of critical reflexivity, epistemic plurality, and care. It challenges dominant Eurocentric approaches that privilege data-driven compliance and performance management, arguing instead for a model grounded in relationality, humanisation, and contextual responsiveness. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Behari-Leak (2024) and Behari-Leak and Sabata (2024), the article proposes a conceptual framework for Learning Analytics induction built around three principles: epistemic pluralism, fugitive planning, and Ubuntu. Through this reframing, the article contributes to the New Academics Transitioning into Higher Education Project (NATHEP) agenda by advancing a decolonial approach to professional learning that prepares academics to engage data critically, ethically, and in the service of social justice. The integration of LA into academic practice must be understood within the broader context of coloniality.

This article is guided by a central question:

How can academic induction into Learning Analytics be reframed as a decolonial praxis in South African higher education?

This overarching inquiry is pursued through three subsidiary questions:

- What colonial logics are embedded in the ways academics are currently inducted into LA?
- What theoretical resources support a decolonial reframing of that induction?
- What principles and practices might operationalise such a reframing within professional learning?

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

This is a conceptual article in that, rather than reporting empirical findings, it develops a theoretical argument by reading current LA induction practices through the lens of decolonial thought, drawing principally on Mignolo's (2009) account of coloniality and epistemic disobedience, Harney and Moten's (2013) notion of fugitive planning and Study, and the articulation of uBuntu as an alternative tradition. The New Academics Transitioning into Higher Education Project (NATHEP) serves as the project context from which this reflection emerges: it furnishes the empirical and institutional backdrop of induction in South African universities (Toni 2024; Behari-Leak and Sabata 2024), while the analytic framework is derived from decolonial theory. This article offers guiding principles for reimagining induction, to be tested and elaborated in practice.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The colonial matrix of power in higher education

Traditionally defined as the "domination over a people and its culture and the appropriation of its wealth, labour and natural environment" (Muldoon and Wu 2023, 3), colonialism did not end with political independence. It persists through structures of power, knowledge, and subjectivity that continue to shape contemporary institutions, including higher education, having introduced authoritarian governance marked by centralised control and exclusionary decision-making, sustained by weak accountability (Fletcher and Harvey 2018; Addison 2009). This persistence is coloniality.

Coloniality embeds itself in the mundane aspects of everyday life (Maldonado-Torres 2007), functioning as the dark side of modernity by universalising Western rationality as the

singular way of knowing and being (Mignolo 2009; Mignolo and Escobar 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). Termed the colonial matrix of power, it positions Western epistemologies as universal while maintaining structural control over economics, authority, gender and sexuality, and knowledge (Quijano 2000, 545; Mignolo 2007, 156; Muldoon and Wu 2023).

South Africa's higher education system was constituted to preserve Whiteness, a "normative structure in society that marginalises People of Colour and privileges White people" (Cabrera et al 2017, 18). Its institutions were colonial projects modelled on European and American universities; under Apartheid, Verwoerd located higher education for Black South Africans within the Bantu Education Policy, creating institutions to "serve black students banned from attending segregated white-only universities" (Ilorah 2006, 79), thereby institutionalising racialised and epistemic segregation. These legacies still entrench European-American epistemic hegemonies, positioning Africans as subjects rather than producers of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Heleta and Dilraj 2024).

This suppression is captured by the coloniality of knowledge, one element of a triadic matrix alongside the coloniality of power, which can be understood as "the violent imposition of ways of being, thinking, and feeling", that denies alternative epistemologies (Ricaurte 2019, 351) and the coloniality of being, which shapes subjectivities in dehumanising ways (Maldonado-Torres 2007). Together these produce a "colonisation of the mind" and epistemicide, an epistemic violence enacted through curricula and research paradigms (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Gray 2023). These hierarchies materialise through contemporary data infrastructures.

ACADEMIC INDUCTION

Academic development is essential to both staff and student development (Behari-Leak 2024), and induction is a foundational process. Rather than a once-off event, it is increasingly understood as a lifelong trajectory through which academics move from novices to autonomous professionals capable of navigating institutional norms (Sánchez-Tarazaga et al 2024; Toni 2024), positioning induction not as mere orientation but as ongoing professional identity formation (Mathieson et al 2024). A systematic review by Sánchez-Tarazaga et al (2024) shows induction is delivered in diverse formats, including mentoring, workshops, and networking, varying from a few hours to two years, though year-long programmes are most common. Induction thus emerges as a structured yet flexible mechanism for identity formation and capacity development.

Despite these intentions, the literature reveals tensions in how induction is enacted, particularly in South Africa. In a cross-case analysis of NATHEP universities, Toni (2024) found induction practices were often compliance-oriented, marked by information overload and weak theoretical grounding. To move beyond this, induction must prioritise how new academics integrate into the social, cultural, and epistemic fabric of their departments, foregrounding informal learning, collegial engagement, and peer networks to cultivate individual and collective agency (Mathieson et al 2024). Such an approach shifts induction from orientation to a relational, dialogical process of becoming. NATHEP also acted as a catalyst for reimagining induction. Toni (2024) documents a shift toward continuous professional development, accompanied by a move from passive information transmission to more critical, interactive, and knowledge-generating approaches, with some universities incorporating decolonial elements and centring African cultures and epistemologies. This matters because ineffective induction tends to produce high staff turnover and low engagement (Mathieson et al 2024). These processes are not context-free: institutional histories such as rurality, mergers, multi-campus configurations, and staff turnover shape induction design (Toni 2024). Yet many practices continue as if higher education existed in a historical vacuum, focusing narrowly on procedures and techniques while neglecting the colonial and apartheid legacies that structure academic life. Such ahistorical induction obscures structural inequalities and perpetuates the "colonisation of the mind", socialising African scholars to reproduce Western epistemologies as universal (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013), thereby risking reproduction of the very inequalities it ought to challenge. At the same time, emerging practices reposition induction as a site of reflexivity. Tools such as questionnaires and portfolios have enabled systematic needs analysis and reflexive engagement, making programmes more responsive to context, while academic developers themselves have emerged as more reflexive agents with enhanced confidence, agency, and commitment to collaborative learning (Toni 2024). Induction thus becomes not only institutional integration but a space for epistemic negotiation and transformation.

PROFESSIONALISATION

The rapid massification and digitalisation of higher education have placed extraordinary pressures on early-career academics, who navigate limited resources, acute time constraints, and rising expectations for measurable productivity (Archer 2008; Monk and McKay 2017). Within this environment, professionalisation emerges as a contested mechanism. On one view, it involves "developing the capacity of the academic teacher, as opposed to academic

researcher, who is at the coalface of the university classroom, involved in practice" (Behari-Leak and Ganas 2024), socialising new academics into the norms, culture, and evaluative regimes of the university (Sánchez-Tarazaga et al 2024). Yet such professionalisation often privileges compliance over criticality, and assimilation over ethical becoming (Harney and Moten 2013; Behari-Leak 2024).

Harney and Moten (2013) remind us that professionalisation is never neutral; it operates within a neoliberal university structured by surveillance, audit, and managerial control, and developmental initiatives can be co-opted into technologies of enclosure that discipline thought, regulate affect, and stimulate performativity. In modern universities, LA frequently serves as the primary apparatus for this enclosure, providing administrators with continuous metrics on both student engagement and staff effectiveness. What Harney and Moten (2013) and Behari-Leak and Ganas (2024) disclose is the ambivalence at the heart of professionalisation: it is at once a site of empowerment and a mechanism of capture. Through Foucault's notion of the heterotopia, Grant and Barrow (2013) show how such induction spaces operate as instruments of governmentality, that is, networks of self-regulation that normalise particular ways of being while casting others as beyond the pale (Lemke 2001, cited in Grant and Barrow 2013). They trace how the shift from an optional, collegial seminar to a compulsory, workshop-based programme reconstituted induction as an overtly normalising technology, one that works to fashion "docile teacher bodies" (Grant and Barrow 2013, p. 306) by casting new academics as deviant and their inexperience as a kind of crisis to be corrected. The workshop form is, in their account, the more governmental mode where carefully sequenced tasks direct attention to the facilitator's agenda, participants are recruited to police that agenda in one another, and renders their compliance available to surveillance (Grant and Barrow 2013). Induction, in this reading, is never simply the transmission of teaching technique; it is a spatial technology for producing recognisable academic subjects.

This article places induction precisely within this liminal space. Oriented through relational ontology and decolonial praxis, induction must keep these tensions open, tending to the pedagogical capacities and ethical sensibilities Behari-Leak and Ganas (2024) envision while cultivating the fugitive, collective agency Harney and Moten (2013) call Study. Such a framing renders induction less a process of professional domestication than an act of ontological and epistemic liberation within and against the neoliberal university. When induction is oriented entirely toward assimilation, new academics are taught to accept predictive algorithms and dashboards as absolute truths rather than as subjective, socially constructed artefacts.

LEARNING ANALYTICS AS A SITE OF POWER

RQ1: What colonial logics are embedded in the ways academics are currently inducted into LA?

This article's critique of the non-critical adoption of LA in South African higher education rests on a historical through-line connecting colonial and apartheid-era surveillance to contemporary digital data infrastructures. South African literature on technology adoption is replete with positivist research that fails to critique emerging technologies and their social impact (Iliadis and Russo 2016; Kwet 2019). The Apartheid state marginalised African uses of technology, even where these had long histories, such as Zulu metallurgy (Edwards and Hecht 2010, 619) or San relational cosmologies of the celestial bodies that prefigured modern astronomy (Binnerman and Davis 2020, 8). Biometric systems such as the "Book of Life" functioned as technologies of racialised governance, classifying bodily data to regulate movement, labour, and citizenship (Edwards and Hecht 2010). Breckenridge (2014, 27) conceptualises such biometric technologies as "mathematical tools of identification" that enabled the colonial state to identify the *Bantu* people, producing subjects within a hierarchy of power and rendering populations legible, controllable, and exploitable. More recently, technology also served resistance: in the 1980s the African National Congress built an underground encrypted communication network linking leaders and combatants (Garrett and Edwards 2015, 13).

Data has always served the colonial project's divide-and-conquer logic, such as when census data was used to categorise indigenous communities (Zembylas 2026). While modalities have shifted from article and biometric records to algorithmic tracking, the underlying rationality persists: the appropriation of human life as data for governance and economic value. Data is never raw, always undergoing pre-processing at various phases of its life cycle (Iliadis and Russo 2016, 1); by the time it enters a relational database in usable form (Denis and Goëta 2014, 7), it has already assumed another form (Leonelli 2015). Design decisions, ranging from a database's purpose to the conceptualisation of variables and choice of sources, yield inconsistent findings (Mallinder and O'Rourke 2016, 494), granting the developer indirect power over how knowledge is produced (Kitchin and Lauriault 2014; Iliadis and Russo 2016).

It is within this colonial matrix of power that datafication, which increasingly quantifies the social and natural worlds (Couldry and Mejias 2019; Zembylas 2026), must be examined alongside the rise of LA. Scholars have begun to interrogate modern data practices for their role in surveillance and their underlying epistemologies (Thatcher, O'Sullivan, and Mahmoudi 2016; Zembylas 2026). Kohnke and Foung (2024), in a systematic review, found that

datafication establishes new social relations and ideologies that justify the exploitation of behavioural data, such as game logs and forum posts, often linked to student demographics, grades, and survey responses. Most concerning, student data was frequently accessed without institutional approval or student consent, with noble aims such as improved engagement used to justify this exploitation (Kohnke and Foung 2024).

This dynamic, in which the Global North continues to benefit, is a coloniality in which the metropole exercises supervisory power over the periphery. Global data infrastructures operated by Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft ("GAFAM") intensify these logics at scale, transforming surveillance from a state-bound apparatus into a transnational regime of extraction and control (Kwet 2019). The literature is consequently replete with examples of algorithmic coloniality, where decision support systems produce automated decisions shaped by "historical bias, discrimination, racism, and injustice, among other forms of harm" (Mokoena 2023, 163). This is linked to digital colonialism, in which hegemonic powers exert indirect control through centralised ownership of software, hardware, and connectivity (Adam 2019; Kwet 2019), and rests on the conceptualisation of data as a commodity accumulated through dispossession via data licence agreements (Thatcher et al 2016; Mokoena 2023).

This paradigm has given rise to "data capitalism", characterised by the perpetual circulation of data in pursuit of economic expansion (Thatcher et al 2016; Mokoena 2023), marking a new stage in resource appropriation where human life itself becomes a source of value (Couldry and Mejias 2019). This is widely conceptualised as data colonialism, the "ongoing extraction of economic value from human existence via data" (Couldry and Mejias 2021) and the appropriation of data as a resource for economic gain (Zembylas 2026, 29). Involving both extraction and dispossession, its "epistemic and material dimensions...are situated in the broader concept of colonialism itself" (Zembylas 2026, 49). Data are therefore not objective facts (Iliadis and Russo 2016) but are caught within the matrix of power, functioning as a tool for the coloniality of data, defined as the "asymmetrical power relations resultant from the (ab)use of data generated from the various online platforms" (Benyera 2021, 5). Ultimately, data colonialism operates as an epistemic framework that perpetuates existing domination (Thatcher et al 2016; Ricaurte 2019).

These data epistemologies impose violent ways of being and knowing that deny the plurality of human existence (Ricaurte 2019). They enable universities to capture vast amounts of student data, often without consent (Thatcher et al 2016, 994; Kohnke and Foung 2024, 2), alienating students from data linked into "abstracted bundles of quantified consumers that may

be sold, purchased, and aggregated" (Thatcher et al 2016, 994). Such data are used to develop success indicators that, in practice, track failure, designating students as "at-risk" (Morphy 2016; Archer and Prinsloo 2020). This designation is not neutral but has an epistemological intervention: deficit-oriented algorithms trained to predict failure reinforce inequalities by normalising disadvantage as data-driven truth (Archer and Prinsloo 2019, 892). This is epistemic violence in practice, imposing reductive classifications that obscure the structural conditions underpinning students' experiences and undermining genuinely personalised learning (Oates and Johnson 2025).

Moreover, student data cannot be separated from "student identities, histories and beings" (Prinsloo 2017, 25), yet it is routinely extracted and treated as an objective representation of learning, as though "free" to take (Kohnke and Foung 2024, 2). This reinforces a framework in which quantification becomes the dominant mode of knowing, that is, the quantification of learning "facilitates a peculiarly modern ontology, in which the real easily becomes coextensive with what is measurable", granting data-driven systems "exclusive access to the real" (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 432). Digital technologies thus do not merely represent reality but actively shape it (Baskerville, Myers and Yoo 2020).

LA systems may reproduce epistemic hierarchies by privileging quantitative metrics, predictive models, and behavioural proxies over contextual pedagogical knowledge and lived student experience. This can be understood through the *Ontological Reversal*, in which abstract, data-driven representations are treated as more real than the situated realities they represent (Dahlin 2003, 77), such that "abstract representations" come to define reality rather than describe it. LA thus risks reifying dashboards, predictive scores, and engagement metrics as objective truths while obscuring the conditions that generate the data. Where LA outputs are taken as more 'real' than the phenomena they represent, decision-making becomes governed by simplified indicators that may erase the richness of teaching and learning; such idealisation reduces the "concreteness and contingencies of everyday life" to abstract formulations (Dahlin 2003, 78), privileging measurable behaviours over less quantifiable dimensions such as belonging, epistemic access, and relational engagement.

INDUCTION INTO COLONIAL DATA REGIMES

Induction into LA is also not a neutral process; it socialises academics into data-driven regimes of knowledge, power, and control. It manifests as a data-centric epistemology assuming data objectively reflects reality and produces superior knowledge for decision-making, obscuring how data infrastructures are embedded in Western epistemologies that structure what counts as

valid knowledge, success, and intervention. Induction thus becomes epistemic socialisation into regimes that extend colonial logics of extraction. Data infrastructures reproduce longer genealogies of colonial surveillance, where classification, identification, and control are rooted in imperial governance and continue to shape contemporary practice (Thatcher et al 2016). LA intensifies the coloniality of knowledge by embedding academics within global infrastructures that privilege Western knowledge systems and success metrics. Consequently, academics inducted into LA become data interpreters, compliance agents, and subjects of metrics, trained to act upon data as truth, align with performance regimes, and internalise metric-based self-evaluation. This reflects disciplinary power within the university, where subjects are produced through surveillance, normalisation, and evaluation (Angumuthoo 2001): as Foucault suggests, power is diffused through institutional practices that shape behaviour and subjectivity (Angumuthoo 2001).

Grant and Barrow (2013, 315) name this formative process as an attempt to "bewitch new academics into becoming particular kinds of teachers", pursuing what they describe as an ontological shift enacted through confessional rituals in which the nascent academic holds a mirror to the self and observes, penitently, what might be done better (Macfarlane and Gourlay 2009, cited in Grant and Barrow 2013). Transposed to LA, the particular kind of subject the induction event seeks to conjure is the data interpreter: the academic who reads the dashboard as a truthful mirror of teaching and learning, aligns with institutional performance regimes, and internalises metric-based evaluations of their own practice. The bewitchment is thus epistemic as much as affective. To be inducted into LA is to be enchanted into treating datafied representations as more real than the situated realities they claim to describe, reproducing the ontological reversal discussed above and extending the disciplinary power that produces subjects through surveillance, normalisation and evaluation (Angumuthoo 2001). The docile teacher body and the compliant data self are, in this sense, the same subject fashioned twice over.

Induction is therefore not simply about learning to use LA tools but about becoming a particular academic subject who sees, knows, and acts through the logics of data. The problem is not LA itself, but the uncritical induction into colonial data regimes that naturalise extraction, obscure power, and reduce the relational, emergent nature of teaching and learning to quantifiable outputs.

TOWARDS A DECOLONIAL INDUCTION INTO LEARNING ANALYTICS

RQ2: What theoretical resources support a decolonial reframing of that induction?

An ethical LA framework requires more than adding ethical guidelines to existing systems; it demands a fundamental reorientation of how data, knowledge, and human subjects are understood in higher education. In response to the technocratic and colonial logics embedded in contemporary data practices, this article proposes a framework grounded in three interrelated dimensions: ontological reorientation, epistemological pluralism, and axiological commitment.

Ontological Reorientation

A decolonial LA framework begins by refusing the reduction of students and academics to abstract data points, and Bhaskar's (2020) Ontology of Persons names precisely what that reduction gets wrong. It rests on the epistemic fallacy, in which questions of being dissolve into questions of knowing (Bhaskar 2020, 113), so that what a student is collapses into what institutional systems can record; and on actualism, the reduction of the real to the actual (Bhaskar 2020, 114). A dashboard displays the actual such as logins, submissions, assessment attempts, while the real also includes unexercised powers and the structural conditions that generate the trace without appearing in it. Because personhood is emergent, present in its material substrate only as enfolded potentiality (Bhaskar 2020, 114), and because each person is a concrete singular bound to a particular geo-historical trajectory (Bhaskar 2020, 118), no behavioural record can be causally adequate to the person it represents. If persons are not reducible to data, neither is data a neutral record: it is a socio-economic construct (Couldry and Mejias 2019), and Donati's (2021) relational sociology allows data relations to be read as emergent social relations with causal powers that shape institutional cultures, professional identities and moral horizons. Data must be seen as situated, contingent and framed (Kitchin and Lauriault 2014, 6) rather than given.

Significantly, Bhaskar's own resolution is not drawn from the European canon, as he displaces the Cartesian *ergo*; he turns to uBuntu where he states "I am because you are" (Bhaskar 2020, 119), thus linking the Ontology of Persons to uBuntu's relational conception of being which can be articulated as "cognatus sum, ergo sumus (I am related; therefore, we are)" (Bujo 2001, 22). Ramose (2002, 36) states the ontology directly where *uBu-* names enfolded be-ing oriented towards unfoldment, while *-Ntu* is the nodal point at which be-ing assumes concrete form, so that *motho* is never a finished entity, its potentialities actualised only in the practical sphere of human relations (Ramose 1999). Two consequences follow for LA. A dashboard can display only unfoldment already accomplished, so inference from recorded

behaviour to latent capacity is an ontological claim disguised as a statistical one. And because unfoldment is relational, a risk score generated for a student not yet held in relations of care measures the poverty of those relations, not the capacity of the person. Against efficiency and throughput, *feta kgomo o tshware motho,* holds that human life takes precedence over accumulation (Ramose 1999, Ramose 2010). Human dignity and relational flourishing (*motho*) must supersede transactional efficiency, accumulation, throughput, and metrics (*kgomo*). Dashboards engineered around efficiency and risk mitigation treat humans as units of throughput rather than beings in process. Induction must therefore equip new academics to read the dashboard as a record of the actual, to ask routinely what is real but unrecorded, and to treat "at risk" as a description of position within relations rather than an attribute of a person.

Epistemic pluralism

The second dimension challenges the dominance of data-centric epistemologies that privilege quantification, prediction, and computational reasoning as the primary sources of knowledge. Induction should enable academics to be "satisfied with an unstable and shifting account of what makes for knowledge in different cases" (Zangwill 2020, p. 486). This epistemic pluralism rejects the assumption that knowledge is singular, universal, and stable, recognising instead that it is contingent, situated, and shaped by historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. Induction thereby becomes a critical site for unsettling dominant epistemologies and cultivating reflexivity about how knowledge is produced and legitimised.

Such a shift is necessary given the enduring coloniality of knowledge in higher education. Subverting colonialism requires rethinking the curriculum (al Attar and Abdelkarim 2023), which is not neutral but implicated in reproducing epistemic hierarchies; a Western-oriented curriculum continues to empower Whiteness, positioning Eurocentric knowledge as universal while marginalising alternatives. Epistemic pluralism is therefore not simply about inclusion but about disrupting the dominance of particular knowledge traditions and creating space for multiple ways of knowing, being, and teaching.

This article consequently reimagines induction as Study (Harney and Moten 2013), a collective, reflexive activity through which academics learn the rules of the university but also learn to question and reimagine them. Study is what academics do with each other, emerging when people gather to think together outside formal structures of assessment, productivity, or managerial control (Harney and Moten 2013). As they put it:

> "It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal – being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or

> people working together in a factory – there are these various modes of activity." (Harney and Moten 2013, p. 110).

Conceptualising induction through the lens of Study thus repositions it from institutional socialisation to collective intellectual formation (Harney and Moten 2013). To operationalise this, universities must carve out spaces intentionally decoupled from performance management, one of which is the hackathon.

Axiological commitment to uBuntu

The third dimension foregrounds the values underpinning LA practices, shifting attention from what data can do to what it ought to do. Within a decolonial and relational framework, uBuntu functions as a critical axiological foundation, reorienting LA away from instrumental rationality toward ethical responsibility, relationality, and human flourishing. As an integrated philosophical system connecting ontology, epistemology, and axiology, uBuntu affirms relational existence as the basis of being, recognises collective knowledge as valid, and foregrounds care, reciprocity, and dignity as central ethical principles.

Grounded in African philosophical traditions, uBuntu promotes a holistic understanding of human existence emphasising the interconnectedness of humanity, spirituality, and the environment, challenging the reductionist logics of Western modernity. Ethical approaches to technology must account for the historical and socio-cultural contexts in which technologies operate, particularly in Africa, where technological systems have often reproduced colonial patterns of exclusion (Mokoena 2023). In contrast to Western traditions prioritising individual autonomy, uBuntu foregrounds relationality, recognising that identity and meaning emerge through social interdependence, aligning with decolonial critiques that dominant epistemologies are rooted in specific geo-historical power configurations (Mignolo 2009).

Ubuntu thus presents a relational account of ethics, where personhood is not an inherent attribute but an emergent property of relationships. This resonates with the argument that knowledge is socially situated and shaped by power relations rather than universally objective (Ricaurte 2019). Ubuntu is not static but an ongoing ethical process of "becoming more humane" (Mokoena 2023, 149), positioning ethics as lived practice rather than abstract principle. Ubuntu therefore offers a pathway for rehumanising digital systems, foregrounding care, reciprocity, and communal well-being as design principles that challenge efficiency-driven and surveillance-oriented approaches. African data ethics operationalises these commitments through principles such as communalism, self-determination, and the centring of

marginalised communities (Barrett et al 2025), highlighting that ethical LA must prioritise relational accountability over institutional control.

Within this framework, knowledge and education are inherently ethical practices. Learning is not individualistic but a collective process shaped by dialogue, empathy, and shared experience, challenging the framing of education as individual achievement measured through data-driven metrics. Education becomes a relational endeavour in which personal success is inseparable from communal well-being. Ubuntu thus redefines both epistemology and pedagogy, positioning education as a practice of care, mutual recognition, and shared responsibility whose goal is the cultivation of humane, socially responsible individuals. For LA, this implies that data should not categorise and control but support relational understanding, foster belonging, and promote justice.

In reimagining induction, uBuntu is not merely a cultural trope but a grounding principle for academic freedom and institutional identity (Radebe 2025), providing the ethical anchor for African universities to reflect the ethos of the communities they serve. Applied to LA induction, the relational aspect of learning is not secondary to the data; rather, the data must be interrogated through a lens of symbiotic relationship (Radebe 2025). Induction should move away from teaching academics how to monitor students and instead focus on how data can facilitate the ethical existence and mutual growth of both academic and student.

Radebe (2025) argues that academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and public accountability must be anchored in relational ethics prioritising justice, reciprocity, and responsibility to communities rather than individual autonomy or market-driven imperatives. Ubuntu thus challenges the technocratic values embedded in LA induction, repositioning LA as a moral practice that requires academics to reflect on what is valued, whose success matters, and how dignity and belonging are enacted through data. Academic induction thereby becomes a site of ethical formation, where academic freedom is understood as the responsibility to use data in ways that promote human flourishing and resist deficit, colonial logics (Radebe 2025).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

RQ3: What principles and practices might operationalise such a reframing within professional learning?

Reconfiguring academic induction in LA requires a fundamental shift in how data, knowledge, and academic identity are understood. Traditional induction functions as socialisation, normalising technocratic logic that positions data as objective truth, thereby privileging metrics over pedagogical judgement and reducing academics and students to measurable subjects. In

contrast, a decolonial approach, grounded in relational ontology, uBuntu, and epistemological pluralism, reframes induction as a space for critical reflection, dialogue, and the co-construction of knowledge. The suggestions below operationalise this shift by positioning induction as a formative process and highlighting practices that disrupt hierarchical knowledge structures and enable more relational, contextually grounded engagements with LA.

Hackathon sessions

Instead of formal training seminars on how to navigate the institutional Learning Management System, induction should feature unstructured, peer-led hackathons. Hackathons, are traditionally understood to be “events where computer programmers and others involved in software development, including graphic designers, interface designers and project managers, collab orate intensively on software projects in a short period of time, typically 24-36 hours” (Nandi and Mandernach 2016, 346). Although these are geared towards information technology professionals, they have the potential of being used in academic development scenarios (O'Riordan and Gormley 2023). For instance, as part of the "DCU Futures" initiative at Dublin City University (“DCU”), O'Riordan and Gormley (2023) sought to reimagine undergraduate education by shifting away from a traditional conference format to a hands-on, one-day hackathon. One of the objectives was to provide staff with first-hand experience of a hackathon to support their own implementation of the method (O'Riordan and Gormley 2023). Academic staff recognised value of hackathons as an innovative learning experience for the design of authentic and sustainable assessments (O'Riordan and Gormley 2023). Rather than traditional, passive forms of staff development (e.g., workshops or conferences), the hackathon provides a hands-on, immersive learning environment where academics actively engage in solving real teaching and assessment challenges. A central professional development benefit is that academics experience learning from a student perspective, which helps them rethink their own pedagogical practices. Participants valued “being in the shoes of students” which fostered empathy and reflexivity about teaching approaches and assessment design (O'Riordan and Gormley 2023, 9-11).

For the purposes of inducting academics in LA, this article proposes that these hackathons be spread over a five-day period. In these sessions, early-career academics bring anonymised samples of their course data to analyse collaboratively. The goal is not to prove teaching efficacy, but to engage in a common intellectual practice in which academics question what the data are missing and brainstorm pedagogical interventions grounded in care. However,

hackathons tend to lack the time needed for deep reflection and meaningful research (O'Riordan and Gormley 2023). This necessitates the development of safe spaces for academics.

Safe spaces

Induction coordinators play a pivotal role as facilitators of academic development within hackathon-based induction. As shown by O'Riordan and Gormley (2023), the presence of a dedicated facilitator who actively steers the process, structures engagement, and sustains momentum across phases was central to the success of the academic staff hackathon. In this sense, the induction coordinator is not merely an organiser, but a pedagogical guide who mediates learning, supports collaboration, and creates the conditions for meaningful engagement with complex teaching challenges.

From a critical perspective, this facilitative role must also be understood as ethical and political. Drawing on the notion of fugitive planning, induction coordinators are tasked with resisting the encroachment of neoliberal surveillance logics into professional development spaces. This requires a deliberate commitment to protecting the integrity of these hackathon environments as spaces of "Study" where academics can think, experiment, and reflect without fear of evaluation or managerial oversight. In practice, this means establishing clear data governance and data-sharing boundaries, ensuring that insights generated during hackathon activities are not fed into performance management systems or reported back to human resources. By doing so, induction coordinators cultivate psychological safety, enabling authentic dialogue, critical reflection, and pedagogical risk-taking which are conditions that are essential for transformative professional development.

Communities of practice

In the DCU case, the hackathon created a highly interactive, team-based environment where participants worked collectively on shared pedagogical challenges, fostering collegiality, dialogue, and mutual learning. Such configurations move beyond individualised induction models toward communities of practice, where academics learn with and from one another through structured collaboration. Participants explicitly valued the opportunity to "share ideas, learn, interact, socialise and communicate with peers" and to gain insight into how colleagues navigate teaching in different contexts (O'Riordan and Gormley 2023, 9). This suggests that hackathons do not merely transfer knowledge but actively produce relational academic identities grounded in collective inquiry.

Importantly, these hackathon-based communities of practice create conditions for collective resistance to deficit-oriented data narratives. When academics engage together in interpreting data, designing assessments, and reflecting on student learning, they are less likely to accept reductive, individualising interpretations of student performance. Instead, the shared space enables them to contextualise data within broader social, institutional, and pedagogical dynamics. In this way, data becomes a resource for care, inclusion, and relational understanding, rather than a tool for categorisation or surveillance. The collaborative intensity of the hackathon which was described as a space of "discussion, negotiation, and activity" (O'Riordan and Gormley 2023, 6) supports the emergence of solidarities among academics, allowing them to collectively interrogate and reframe how student success is understood.

Reverse tutelage

One way of operationalising epistemic pluralism within academic induction is through engagement with "reverse tutelage". Gopal (2021, 887) conceptualises "reverse tutelage" as the instance wherein those in the metropole learn from the periphery, thereby unsettling the assumed directionality of knowledge production. This perspective challenges the colonial logic that positions the centre as the source of legitimate knowledge and the periphery as its recipient. As Davidović and Turner (2023, 674) note, "the metropole often took lessons from the periphery, establishing a reverse tutelage between centre and periphery".

Engaging with reverse tutelage enables a critical interrogation of the spatial and epistemic organisation of knowledge, making visible the relational dynamics between metropole and periphery. It creates opportunities to identify which forms of knowledge have been historically ignored, suppressed, or devalued, and which epistemologies remain unchallenged within institutional practices (Davidović and Turner 2023, 674–675). In the context of academic induction, this requires creating pedagogical spaces where academics can critically reflect on whose knowledge is centred, whose knowledge is marginalised, and how these dynamics shape teaching, learning, and research.

Reverse tutelage does not simply invert existing hierarchies, but rather destabilises them by fostering dialogical and relational approaches to knowledge production. It aligns with the broader aims of epistemic pluralism by recognising that knowledge emerges through interaction across contexts, rather than flowing unidirectionally from centre to periphery. As such, integrating reverse tutelage into academic induction can support the development of more reflexive, contextually grounded, and socially just academic practices.

Student voice

To counter the "Ontological Reversal", students must be actively engaged in reflecting on these ontological shifts, including what is considered real, valuable, and meaningful within their educational experiences (Morphy 2016). Such engagement is critical for disrupting epistemic injustice and re-centring student agency in the interpretation and use of their data. However, this marginalisation of student voice is not incidental; it is institutionalised through academic induction processes. Induction into LA functions as a site of socialisation, where new academics are trained to privilege dashboards, indicators, and predictive systems over pedagogical judgement and relational engagement.

Reintroducing student voice into academic induction disrupts these logics. Drawing on the work of Ravhuhali et al (2022), the inclusion of students in induction processes challenges the traditional assumption that induction is a technocratic, human-resource-driven activity from which students are excluded. Instead, it repositions induction as a relational and dialogical space in which knowledge is co-constructed (Ravhuhali et al 2022). Through such inclusion, new academics are exposed to the diverse needs, lived realities, and expectations of their students, enabling a shift from abstracted, data-driven understandings toward contextually grounded pedagogical practice (Ravhuhali et al 2022). Ravhuhali et al (2022, 95) argue that "student inclusion in the induction of new academics is a way of advancing and enhancing epistemic justice, collaborative knowledge building, knowledge-sharing, and knowledge co-creation as well as ensuring inclusive participation for all, particularly students". This insight aligns with decolonial critiques of knowledge production, which emphasise the need to challenge dominant epistemologies that silence alternative ways of knowing and being (Ricaurte 2019).

CONCLUSION

This article set out to ask how academic induction into Learning Analytics might be reframed as a decolonial praxis in South African higher education. It has argued, first, that induction is not a neutral procedural exercise but a mechanism of epistemic socialisation through which new academics are recruited into data regimes that extend colonial logics of classification, extraction, and control, and through which an ontological reversal of learning into metrics is normalised. Second, it has shown that decolonial thought offers usable resources for interrupting that socialisation by operationalising Mignolo's epistemic disobedience, Harney and Moten's fugitive planning and Study, and uBuntu as a relational axiology. Third, it has proposed that these resources converge on three interdependent principles, namely ontological

reorientation, epistemic pluralism, and an axiological commitment to uBuntu, which together reposition data as a situated and interpretive resource, and induction as a space of collective meaning-making rather than compliance.

Realising this reorientation requires concrete commitments from those who design and host induction. For academic developers, a first practical step is to audit existing induction provision, asking which sessions teach academics to operate dashboards and which, if any, ask what dashboards cannot see. A second is to reallocate the time recovered from tool orientation to critical data literacy, so that new academics learn to read a predictive model against the histories of the students it classifies, and to treat the designation "at-risk" as a claim to be interrogated rather than a finding to be actioned. A third is to convene the peer-led hackathon proposed above, in which new academics work with anonymised samples of their own course data, supported by a facilitator who guides rather than evaluates (O'Riordan and Gormley 2023). A fourth is to negotiate and document the data-use boundaries of that space before it convenes, so that participants know what will and will not leave the room. A fifth is to invite students in as co-facilitators and interlocutors rather than as data subjects (Ravhuhali et al 2022). A sixth is to constitute each cohort as a standing community of practice, sustained through reflective portfolios and periodic reconvening, so that induction becomes a trajectory rather than an event (Toni 2024).

Institutions carry responsibility for the conditions that make such work possible. This begins with a formal separation between the developmental and evaluative uses of data, expressed as an explicit policy commitment that material generated during induction is not routed to performance management, human resources, or promotion processes. It extends to resourcing, since communities of practice cannot be sustained on goodwill alone; induction requires dedicated budget, workload recognition for facilitators, and provision that continues beyond the first year of appointment. It requires, further, that ethical and epistemic criteria enter the procurement, design, and review of LA systems themselves, including scrutiny of deficit-oriented indicators and the participation of students and academic developers in the governance structures through which such systems are approved (Prinsloo 2017). Finally, it requires that these commitments be written into institutional induction policy and into the role descriptions and development pathways of academic developers, so that decolonial practice becomes an expectation of the post rather than the discretionary labour of committed individuals (Radebe 2025).

These proposals are offered as guiding principles rather than as a template. The framework advanced here is conceptual and author-developed, has not yet been tested

empirically, and will need to be adapted to institutional histories that differ markedly across the South African system in respect of rurality, merger legacies, and patterns of staff turnover (Toni 2024). Further research might usefully trace what happens when such an induction is enacted, such as, whether a protected space holds under audit pressure, and what new academics carry from it into their teaching and their use of student data. The steps outlined above are modest, however, they shift induction from a technology of capture towards a practice of collective, ethical becoming, and make the induction of academics into Learning Analytics itself a site of decolonial possibility

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