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Reflection as Transformative Praxis: An Exploration of Early-Career Lecturers' Pedagogical Reflections in Academic Induction

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Abstract

This study investigates how early-career lecturers in a South African university reflect on their teaching philosophies and practices during academic induction, and how such reflection shapes their professional identities within contexts of institutional constraint. Drawing on Schön's Reflective Practice Theory, Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, and Barnett's notion of critical being, the study conceptualises reflection as transformative praxis. Herein, it is a recursive process that fuses cognition, emotion, and ethics. Using interpretive thematic analysis of thirty-eight induction reflective homework submissions, the findings reveal reflection as both a pedagogical and moral act that enables lecturers to adapt, humanise, and reimagine teaching amid systemic inequalities. Reflection functions as an instrument of agency, resilience, and epistemic justice, bridging personal transformation with curriculum renewal. The study contributes to scholarship on academic induction by reframing reflection as a moral and relational project that underpins professional becoming and decolonial transformation in African higher education.

Keywords: Reflective Practice, Transformative Learning, Academic Induction, Early-career Lecturers, Professional Identity, Higher Education

Introduction

In higher education, the academic induction has evolved from a peripheral orientation exercise into a central instrument of academic development. This shift saw universities increasingly recognising that disciplinary expertise, however sophisticated, does not inherently confer pedagogical prowess (Reddy et al., 2016). As such, as Jeske and Olson (2022) highlight, the induction serves as an intentional pedagogical space where early-career lecturers encounter the institutional, epistemic and affective dimensions of academic life. However, as scholars remind us (Billot & King, 2017; Ndebele, 2013), induction practices remain uneven and often oscillate between bureaucratic compliance and developmental promise. Some programmes are reduced to procedural checklists; others, more ambitiously, attempt to promote reflective, research-informed teaching. The danger of the former lies in its technicist impulse: it treats teaching as a transferable skill divorced from the socio-cultural and political contexts that shape learning. Therefore, this paper aligns with scholars such as Boud and Brew (2013), who argue that academic development must transcend functionalism and engage with the "affective and epistemic lifeworld" of academics if it is to be genuinely transformative.

Studies in academic development appreciate the value of Mezirow's (1991) transformative reflective articulation. For instance, Mathieson (2011) and Fitzmaurice (2013) emphasise that when academics explicitly construct and revise their teaching philosophies, they enact identity work, that is, making visible the moral and intellectual commitments underpinning their pedagogy. Similarly, Roxå and Mårtensson (2015) as well as Wenger (1998) highlight how such reflexive articulation connects individuals to communities of practice, allowing them to negotiate belonging, legitimacy and scholarly voice. For early-career lecturers, writing a teaching philosophy is therefore not merely

descriptive; it is dialogic and generative. It constitutes entry into the collective discourse of the academy.

However, the practice of reflection unfolds within structural conditions that are far from neutral. South African higher education remains marked by historical inequities, epistemic hierarchies and resource disparities, especially within historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs). These structural asymmetries complicate the promise of reflective practice. Lecturers working within under-resourced contexts face material and affective constraints, heavy workloads, limited mentoring, and a lingering culture of performativity (Sebolao, 2019). These factors may reduce reflection to a performative ritual rather than an emancipatory practice (Sebolao, 2019; Sutherland et al., 2010).

Moreover, the increasingly diverse student body brings with it linguistic, cultural and epistemic complexities that challenge universalist pedagogical models (Santos, 2007). Reflection in such contexts requires not only introspection but also critical awareness of power and positionality. It demands that lecturers interrogate whose knowledge counts, whose voices are heard, and how teaching can be re-oriented toward epistemic justice. Behari-Leak (2024) argues that meaningful professional development must therefore engage lecturers as reflective practitioners and as agents of social transformation within the university. Within these realities, reflection becomes a form of critical praxis, a way of navigating and contesting the contradictions of higher education. In this regard, Boud and Brew (2013) caution that professional development stripped of its relational and contextual dimensions risks reproducing the very inequities it seeks to address. Similarly, Carr (2019) and Mathieson et al. (2024) document how new lecturers often experience a form of professional culture shock. In this framing, they negotiate between the ideals of reflective teaching and the institutional logics of performance, productivity and audit. The challenge, then, is not simply to encourage reflection but to cultivate conditions that make critical reflection possible.

Accordingly, the study set out to explore how early-career lecturers in one South African university engage with reflection during academic induction, and how such engagement functions as a transformative praxis. This entails a process through which they interrogate their teaching philosophies, negotiate institutional constraints, and construct professional identities within complex and unequal academic context. Specifically, the study examined how reflective practice oscillates between theory and lived experience, what institutional and contextual factors enable or constrain meaningful reflection.

Literature review

Locating reflection within professional becoming

To write about reflection in South African higher education is to enter a field of productive tension. Academic induction is often celebrated as the site where the "new academic" is formed, yet it also inherits the contradictions of the modern university: it seeks to cultivate reflective, socially responsive lecturers within systems that often reward performativity over depth. As Barnett (2022) reminds us, the university of our time is a "super complex institution," demanding that academics think and act amid uncertainty while negotiating moral and institutional contradictions. Reflection, therefore, becomes not a luxury but a moral necessity. This is to say it is an imaginative act that allows lecturers to sustain integrity in environments shaped by market logic and managerial audit. In South Africa, these tensions are intensified by historical inequities and structural unevenness. Scholars such as Leibowitz et al. (2015) and Ndebele et al. (2016) highlight how rurality, under-resourcing, and epistemic exclusion shape the nature and possibility of reflection.

Academic induction, particularly at HDIs, thus becomes a form of "pedagogical repair work". In this sense, it is a space where lecturers grapple with inherited institutional cultures while trying to locate themselves as scholarly teachers. As Gumede et al. (2023) and Sithole et al. (2025) argue, pedagogical training in these contexts functions best when it embraces the relational, dialogic, and humanising ethos of professional learning rather than reproducing bureaucratic

templates. Sithole et al (2025) extend this humanising discourse through their study of ePortfolios in academic induction. They demonstrate that reflective tools, when embedded in dialogic frameworks, can transform induction from a compliance ritual into a pedagogical encounter of becoming.

The reflective practitioner and the transformative learner

The literature converges on one central insight: induction is inseparable from identity work. For new lecturers, entering academia involves more than acquiring pedagogical techniques. According to Fitzmaurice (2013) and Carr (2019), it requires repositioning the self within new epistemic and moral terrains. In this context, Boud and Brew (2013) conceptualise academic work as professional practice, arguing that development must engage the relational and affective lifeworld of academics rather than treat them as skill recipients. Within this context, Schön's (1983) Reflective Practice Theory remains the conceptual cornerstone for understanding how professionals learn through action. His distinction between *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action* captures the fluidity and uncertainty of teaching as lived experience. Within higher education, such reflection represents a process of constructing knowledge in practice rather than applying theory to it. This is evident in academic induction settings, where early-career lecturers learn to improvise in response to student needs, institutional complexity, and classroom unpredictability.

Nonetheless, Boud and Brew (2013) and Fitzmaurice (2013) postulate that, reflection is not simply an epistemic tool, but it is also moral, relational, and affective. Schön's technical model risks overlooking how reflection is embedded in human and institutional contexts. Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory offers this missing dimension by locating reflection within processes of critical self-examination and perspective transformation. Through critical reflection, individuals question the assumptions underpinning their actions, often prompted by disorienting dilemmas that destabilise habitual ways of thinking.

This theoretical pairing, Schön's pragmatic reflexivity and Mezirow's transformative critique, has been widely used to conceptualise professional learning (Brookfield, 1995; Behari-Leak, 2024). However, in South Africa, reflection carries an additional weight: it is not only cognitive and moral but also structural and political. Ndebele (2022) refers to this as the contextualised reflexive turn, that is, the need to understand reflection within the realities of power, inequality, and institutional culture. Similarly, Leibowitz et al. (2015) argue that reflective practice in the South is necessarily social reflexivity. Rather, it is the ability to recognise how social structures shape one's agency as an academic. Reflection here is a collective and contextual act, a dialogue with the self, others, and the systems that condition teaching.

Academic induction as a site of negotiation

Academic induction has become central to professionalising university teaching worldwide (Reddy et al., 2016; Billot & King, 2017; Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011). For Baleni et al. (2022), induction programmes in the South African context often oscillate between empowerment and compliance. When overly aligned to institutional performance frameworks, reflection risks becoming a technocratic exercise (Sithole et al., 2025) rather than a space for transformative inquiry. Conversely, when structured around relational mentoring and collaborative engagement, induction can become an incubator for reflective and emancipatory professionalism. Empirical studies support this dialectic.

For instance, Gumede et al. (2023) found that reflective writing within induction nurtures self-awareness and pedagogical confidence among lecturers when coupled with dialogic feedback. In a same vein, Ndebele et al. (2016) show that academic development in rural universities produces transformation when it foregrounds shared narratives of struggle and possibility. In these contexts, reflection operates not merely as an assessment artefact but as what Leibowitz et al. (2015) term collaborative reflexivity, a form of

collective sense-making that strengthens agency. Barnett (2004; 2022) offers a philosophical reading of this tension, describing the academic as a critical being whose reflective capacity sustains meaning in a "super complex" world. Induction, from this perspective, should be less about strictly fitting into institutional systems and more about cultivating moral imagination. This denotes to the capacity to teach and act thoughtfully within such complexity. Such imagination emerges when reflection becomes a praxis, in which the dialectic of thought and action connects learning to context, ethics, and social transformation.

Reflection, identity and the moral self

Identity formation through reflection remains a dominant thread in the literature (Fitzmaurice, 2013; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Reflection enables lecturers to construct coherence between personal biography, disciplinary identity and institutional belonging. Despite its transformative potential, reflection is not uniformly enacted. Studies across African and global South institutions highlight the structural fragilities that undermine reflective depth. These include high workloads, limited mentorship, technological inequities, and audit-driven cultures (Sebolao, 2019; Sutherland et al., 2010). Sithole et al. (2025) found similar dynamics, where some lecturers engaged reflection as critical inquiry, others experienced it as compliance. Within academic induction, this process is deeply affective: new lecturers often oscillate between self-doubt and emerging confidence, between institutional expectation and personal purpose. Behari-Leak (2024) calls this the humanising turn in professional learning, a shift from competence-based training toward relational and embodied pedagogy. The South African scholarship underscores that this identity work is inseparable from structural awareness. Leibowitz et al. (2016) show that reflection acquires ethical potency when it acknowledges inequality and marginalisation as pedagogical conditions rather than background noise. For early-career lecturers, reflection is thus not only about improving technique but about constructing a moral stance toward students, colleagues, and knowledge itself. Barnett's (2022) concept of critical being encapsulates this stance, that to be reflective is to live thoughtfully, critically, and compassionately within one's professional world.

From reflection to reflexivity

When read dialogically, the literature on academic induction and reflective practice reveals a field in flux yet gradually converging around three intersecting propositions. First, induction constitutes a form of identity work. It is a liminal and affective process through which early-career academics author their professional selves within contested institutional ecologies marked by competing discourses of performance, belonging, and transformation (Fitzmaurice, 2013; Ndebele, 2022). Second, reflection emerges as a transformative practice that mediates the journey from novice to scholar by linking experience, theory, and critique, enabling lecturers to interrogate their assumptions and reconstitute their pedagogical worldviews (Schön, 1983; Mezirow, 1991; Sithole et al., 2025).

Third, the emancipatory potential of reflection is deeply contextual; it is shaped by institutional cultures that either constrain or enable reflexivity, depending on the degree to which they encourage dialogue, relationality, and trust (Boud & Brew, 2013; Behari-Leak, 2024). As such, these strands position the present study within the broader project of reimagining academic induction in South Africa as a reflexive, dialogic, and contextually embedded practice. Through the analysis of the reflective homework narratives of early-career lecturers, this study extends the conversation initiated by Sithole et al. (2025), shifting the focus from how reflection is performed to what reflection does. This is to examine how it constructs professional identity, negotiates power within institutional structures, and cultivates agency in the everyday work of teaching and learning.

Reflection as epistemic and transformative work

Beyond individual development, reflection has been reframed as a practice of epistemic justice. In contexts marked by colonial knowledge hierarchies, reflective practice becomes a way to interrogate whose knowledge counts and whose voices are marginalised. Leibowitz et al. (2015) argue that reflexive

pedagogies can create conditions for epistemic inclusion by validating local, indigenous, and experiential knowledges. This aligns with Barnett's (2022) notion of imaginative reason, which is the idea that academics must think beyond the boundaries of received epistemologies. In the conceptualisation of this study, reflection is therefore more than an internal dialogue; it is an epistemic act that reclaims the right to think and teach contextually. As Boughey and McKenna (2021) and Behari-Leak (2024) suggest, to reflect in the postcolonial university is to resist *epistemicide*, to hold open a space for cognitive justice and pedagogical freedom. Reflection thus becomes not merely an academic virtue but a form of agency, a means of humanising knowledge itself.

Theoretical frameworks

This study is underpinned by two complementary theoretical traditions, Schön's Reflective Practice Theory (1983) and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (1991). Both locate reflection at the heart of professional growth and identity transformation. These theories offer instrumental lenses to understanding how early-career lecturers engage with reflective processes during academic induction to construct meaning, navigate complexity, and reimagine their pedagogical identities within the context of South African higher education.

Schön's Reflective Practice Theory

Donald Schön's (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner* remains foundational to understanding professional learning as an act of inquiry within practice. Schön challenges the idea of technical rationality, the belief that professional competence rests on the application of pre-existing theories to practice, and instead proposes that professionals learn through *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. The former refers to thinking on one's feet in the midst of uncertainty, while the latter entails retrospective sense-making. Schön's model recognises that professional knowledge is generated in context, through the dialogic interplay of doing and thinking, rather than transferred from abstract theory to practice. For early-career lecturers, particularly those navigating diverse and under-resourced higher education environments, reflection operates precisely in this space of improvisation.

However, Schön's framework, while invaluable, privileges the individual practitioner and risks overlooking the broader socio-political and institutional conditions that enable or constrain reflective capacity. As argued by Leibowitz et al. (2016) and Ndebele et al. (2016), reflection in South African universities is always already situated within histories of inequity and ongoing structural imbalance. In such contexts, reflective practice is not a solitary cognitive act but a socially mediated process shaped by context, power, and relationality. Here, Leibowitz's concept of "social reflexivity" expands Schön's micro-level focus by foregrounding how academics reflect with others and through institutional cultures. Reflection thus becomes dialogic constituted through mentoring, collegial exchange, and the interpretive communities that define academic induction.

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

While Schön explains how professionals reflect, Jack Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory elucidates what reflection accomplishes. Mezirow conceives of reflection as a critical process through which individuals interrogate their meaning perspectives. In this framing, transformation occurs when individuals encounter a disorienting dilemma, a moment of contradiction or crisis that compels re-evaluation of existing beliefs and practices. Through rational discourse, self-examination, and reframing, the learner reconstructs a more inclusive and integrative worldview. In the reflective narratives of early-career lecturers, such disorienting moments are ubiquitous. For instance, confronting large, disengaged classes; grappling with digital inequities; or realising that disciplinary expertise alone does not equate to teaching competence. These encounters destabilise certainty and prompt reflection that is both epistemic and emotional. Mezirow's framework thus show how such experiences catalyse perspective transformation. This allows lecturers to move from reactive adaptation to critical self-authorship, which is attested in the study by Jaya and Thembane (2025),

who (self)reflected on the experiences of novice supervisors within research supervision.

However, like Schön, Mezirow has been critiqued for overemphasising cognitive rationality and underplaying the affective, moral, and contextual dimensions of learning (Fitzmaurice, 2013; Behari-Leak, 2024). In the South African context, transformation is rarely a purely intellectual exercise. It is inherently entangled with care, survival, and the politics of belonging. As such, reflection becomes not only an instrument for personal growth but a strategy for resilience and ethical resistance within performative institutional cultures (Baleni et al., 2022).

Barnett's notion of critical being

To bridge Schön's pragmatism and Mezirow's rational transformation, Barnett's (2004; 2022) concept of critical being provides a moral-philosophical frame. Barnett argues that the contemporary university demands more than technical competence, for it calls for academics who can think, act, and care critically within conditions of uncertainty. Reflection, in this sense, is not only epistemic but ontological: it is how academics sustain moral imagination and integrity amid institutional turbulence. As such, Barnett's notion of 'super complexity' resonates strongly in the South African university, where early-career lecturers are called to teach and research within historically unequal, bureaucratically dense environments. In this regard, reflection allows them to inhabit this complexity with thoughtfulness rather than compliance. It is the practice through which they become what Barnett calls critical beings, that is, individuals who can act with purpose, compassion, and moral discernment.

In South African higher education, reflection also unfolds as social reflexivity, a term developed by Leibowitz et al. (2015) and extended by Ndebele (2022) to capture the relational and contextual dimensions of reflective practice. Social reflexivity positions reflection as an interaction between agency and structure, echoing Archer's (2000) view that human reflexivity mediates the relationship between individuals and their social contexts. It acknowledges that reflection is shaped by material realities (such as workload and access), cultural logics (including disciplinary hierarchies), and relational networks (mentorship, community, and dialogue). This social turn transforms reflection from a private habit of mind into a collective and contextual practice. Leibowitz and colleagues (2015) illustrate that when reflection is shared, either through writing circles, peer mentoring, or induction workshops, it generates solidarity and professional agency rather than compliance. Similarly, Ndebele et al. (2016) observe that in rural or under-resourced universities, reflective practice becomes a mechanism for navigating structural constraint and re-imagining professional purpose. In such settings, reflection is inherently ethical and political: it constitutes what Freire would call praxis, that is, thought entwined with action in pursuit of humanisation.

Reflection as transformative praxis

Bringing these frameworks into dialogue, this study conceptualises reflection during academic induction as transformative praxis. In this conception, it is a recursive process of inquiry, critique, and identity-making that fuses Schön's practical reflexivity, Mezirow's meaning transformation, Barnett's moral imagination, and the social reflexivity articulated by South African scholars. Reflection, in this synthesis, operates on three interrelated planes:

- Pedagogical praxis, where lecturers learn by doing, adapting, and theorising their teaching through Schön's reflective cycles.
- Transformative learning, where Mezirow's disorienting dilemmas trigger critical self-awareness and redefine professional identity.
- Ethical and contextual reflexivity, where Barnett's critical being and Leibowitz's social reflexivity anchor reflection in moral and institutional realities.

In this framing, reflection is not merely a technique for improving practice but an ontological stance, but a way of being academic that integrates knowledge, emotion, and ethics. It allows early-career lecturers to navigate the

complexities of the South African academy while reclaiming agency as academics committed to humanising and decolonising higher education.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive research design, grounded in the view that meaning is socially and experientially constructed. The quest was to explore how early-career lecturers reflect on their teaching philosophies and practices during academic induction, and how such reflections contribute to professional identity formation. The interpretive orientation was deemed appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the lecturers' lived experiences and sense-making processes, particularly as articulated through reflective writing.

Data sources

The data comprised thirty-eight (n=38) induction homework submissions completed by early-career lecturers who participated in the institutional academic induction programme during the 2024 and 2025 academic years. These written reflections formed part of the structured induction curriculum, which required participants to articulate their teaching philosophies, respond to guided reflective prompts, and critically analyse their pedagogical practices in their classrooms relationing it to theoretical frameworks introduced during the induction. Each homework submission varied in length from two to three pages, which yielded a substantial textual corpus that captured diverse disciplinary perspectives and levels of teaching experience.

The reflections were purposively selected because they represent authentic artefacts of professional learning, texts where lecturers engaged in Schön's (1983) modes of reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action as they examined their teaching experiences. They also provided evidence of what Mezirow (1991) describes as transformative reflection, moments when participants questioned underlying assumptions and began to reconceptualise their professional identities.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed an interpretive thematic approach, supported by Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software. The process combined both inductive and theory-driven coding. Initially, all thirty-eight (n=38) reflective homework documents were imported into Atlas.ti and read repeatedly to achieve immersion and holistic understanding. In the first stage, open coding was employed to capture recurring ideas, key phrases, and expressions of reflection. Codes were drawn directly from participants' language to preserve the integrity of meaning.

In the second stage, axial coding was guided by Schön's (1983) and Mezirow's (1991) frameworks to identify reflective modalities and transformative learning patterns. Codes such as reflection-in-action, critical incident, perspective shift, teaching philosophy articulation, identity tension, and institutional constraint were clustered into broader categories. These categories were subsequently refined into three overarching themes aligned with the study's objectives: a) Reflection on teaching philosophies and pedagogical practices, b) enablers and constraints of meaningful reflection; and c) reflection as a process of professional identity transformation. To this effect, memos were developed throughout to record interpretive insights and theoretical linkages. Atlas.ti's network view was used to visualise relationships between codes, allowing patterns of reflective depth and transformation to emerge across participants.

Trustworthiness

Consistent with qualitative tradition, credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data and iterative coding verification. Peer debriefing was conducted with fellow academic developers to enhance interpretive rigour. An audit trail, including analytic memos and code reports, was maintained within Atlas.ti to support confirmability. Thick descriptions of reflective excerpts were used to enable readers to assess transferability to similar academic development contexts.

Ensuring anonymity

All documents were anonymised, and participant identifiers were replaced with numerical codes, for instance Homework 1 (HW1) to Homework 38 (HW38). Participation in the induction programme was voluntary, and lecturers were informed that their anonymised reflections might be used for research purposes. The study adhered to the principles of confidentiality, respect, and non-maleficence.

Findings and analysis

This section presents and interprets the findings derived from the analysis of reflective homework (n=38) submissions written by early-career lecturers who participated in the Academic Induction Programme between 2024 and 2025. As a point of departure, the profile of lecturers/homeworks is briefly outlined to provide context.

Participant/Homework profiles

The participant profile table (Annexture A) reflects a diverse and representative sample of thirty-eight (38) early-career lecturers and academic staff who participated in the Academic Induction Programme between 2024 and 2025. The profile shows that the cohort spans four faculties, Health Sciences, Humanities, Management and Law, and Science and Agriculture. The distribution of disciplines and departments demonstrates the interdisciplinary character of the induction programme, encompassing both theoretical and applied fields such as Nursing, Law, Biochemistry, Criminology, Agriculture, Theatre, Mathematics, and Development Planning. This diversity underscores the programme's capacity to accommodate varied epistemic traditions and pedagogical orientations. A significant proportion of participants teach in practice-oriented disciplines (e.g., Nursing, Clinical Medicine, Agriculture, and Optometry), where reflection-in-action and experiential learning are central to professional formation.

Empirical findings

The empirical findings are presented thematically, following the synthesis summarised in Table 1. The table provides an overview of the major themes and subthemes identified across the corpus, including reflective pedagogy and praxis, transformative learning, contextual realities, professional identity formation, curriculum renewal, and reflection as ethical and relational practice.

Table 1: Thematic analysis of reflective homework narratives (HW1-HW38).

Overarching theme	Thematic cluster	Indicative codes	Representative excerpts
1.Reflective pedagogy and praxis	Student-centred and inquiry-based learning	Interactive learning, co-construction, reflective dialogue, experiential learning, learner autonomy	"*Teaching should come down to the students' level through examples they can relate to*" (HW1); "*Students are co-constructors of meaning, not passive recipients*" (HW21); "*Drama requires critical conversation and reflection*" (HW26).
	Adaptive and flexible teaching	Reflection-in-action, lesson redesign, scaffolding, blended learning	"*I redesigned my module after realising students struggled with applied concepts*" (HW12); "*I adjust teaching methods as I teach, each group needs a different rhythm*" (HW37).
2.Transformative reflection and learning	Critical self-questioning and perspective shifts	Disorienting dilemmas, meaning transformation, self-interrogation	"*I realised my teaching philosophy had to change from content delivery to facilitation*" (HW7); "*Reflection helped me redefine the ethics of care in my classroom*" (HW30).

	Reflection as moral and epistemic growth	Self-awareness, professional humility, social consciousness	"*Covid-19 changed how I view teaching, we must teach differently now*" (HW7); "*when you reflect you realise that teaching is an act of love*" (HW34).
3.Contextual and institutional realities	Structural enablers and constraints	Resource scarcity, workload, digital inequities, peer mentorship	"*Connectivity problems excluded some students from participating*" (HW1); "*The supportive peer discussions in induction helped me grow*" (HW15); "*Large classes limit feedback but encourage creative methods*" (HW22).
	Rurality and socio-economic context	Rural disadvantage, infrastructural fragility, empathy for students	"*Living in Mankweng helped me understand the hardship my students face*" (HW34); "*Students from rural backgrounds lack exposure but are eager to learn*" (HW38).
	Institutional culture and performativity	Administrative pressures, compliance reflection, evaluation regimes	"*Reflective writing should not become another checklist for management*" (HW17); "*The pressure to publish and perform limits space for genuine reflection*" (HW14).
4.Identity and professional becoming	Reflection as identity work	Self-authorship, role redefinition, emotional reflexivity	"*I now see myself as a facilitator rather than a lecturer*" (HW12); "*I was forced to confront who I am in front of my students*" (HW33).
	Emotional and moral dimensions	Care, empathy, authenticity, vulnerability	"*Kindness makes the world go around; teaching is an act of love*" (HW17); "*I strive to balance empathy with authority*" (HW34).
	Professional confidence and self-efficacy	Growth, self-doubt, mentoring, empowerment	"*Initially I doubted myself, but reflection built my confidence*" (HW10); "*Mentoring helped me translate reflection into action*" (HW27).
5.Curriculum and epistemic renewal	Decolonial and Africanised pedagogy	Indigenous knowledge, African excellence, epistemic justice	"*Curriculum must showcase African excellence*" (HW35); "*I use local examples and indigenous knowledge to contextualise science*" (HW35).
	Relevance and renewal	Curriculum responsiveness, alignment with societal needs	"*Project Management must integrate African realities and sustainability*" (HW25); "*Curriculum must prepare students for rural health challenges*" (HW28).
6.Reflection as ethical and relational praxis	Reflection as care and collegiality	Humanising pedagogy, relational accountability, trust	"*To reflect is to care, it's how we humanise education*" (HW20); "*Reflection happens in community, not isolation*" (HW37).
	Reflection as agency and resistance	Pedagogical activism, critique of systems, ethical stance	"*Reflection is my way of resisting the bureaucracy of higher education*" (HW14); "*Teaching with empathy is a quiet form of resistance*" (HW31).
	Collective reflection and dialogue	Peer learning, mentorship, community of practice	"*Our induction group became more like a reflective circle, we connected during workshops and we grew together*" (HW19); "*Mentorship promoted our critical dialogue about teaching practice*" (HW15).

Reflection on teaching philosophies and practices

Across the dataset, reflection served as both a mirror and a compass, a means for lecturers to look inward and chart forward. Most lecturers described a transition from teacher-centred delivery to learner-centred, constructivist pedagogies. It appears that they used reflection to interrogate assumptions, adapt methods, and locate their teaching within students' lived realities.

For example, one lecturer (HW1) reflected that they strive "to bring teaching down to the students' level, using examples they can relate to, such as traditional beer fermentation." this reflection shows Schön's reflection-in-action: adjusting pedagogy spontaneously to ensure accessibility. Similarly, another lecturer (HW12) in Mathematics wrote, "Students learn best when they discover concepts themselves; my role is to guide, not to tell." The reflection demonstrates both reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action, a recursive cycle of assessing past lessons while planning new approaches.

In the Humanities, one lecturer (HW26) employed performance as a site of inquiry: "in Drama, we create meaning together. I tell my students they are not empty tins waiting to be filled." This dialogic stance embodies Schön's idea of professional artistry, responding reflectively to uncertainty and improvisation. Reflection also became an avenue for emotional and moral insight. In HW10, the lecturer wrote that she "teaches with empathy because I remember how it felt to be invisible as a student." Likewise, a fellow colleague (HW17) explained, "kindness makes the world go around. Teaching is not just an intellectual act, it's an act of love." These reflections suggest humanising pedagogy, which aligns with Mezirow's transformative premise that perspective change begins in affective and moral awareness.

Lecturers also used reflection to evaluate the fit between theory and practice. For instance, in HW25, in Development Studies, the lecturer emphasised that "project management teaching must connect theory with the local economy; otherwise, it becomes abstract and elitist." Others framed reflection as discovery. Another lecturer (HW37), teaching Nutrition, noted, "students learn more deeply when they touch, test, and see. I design lessons around what they can experience." These reflections suggest that lecturers do not treat teaching philosophies as static statements but as evolving, reflexive narratives shaped by context and encounter.

Institutional and contextual factors shaping reflection

Reflection, as many lecturers described, is shaped as much by institutional structures as by personal intention. Some participants located reflection within enabling conditions such as collegial mentorship, induction workshops, and digital affordances. This is exemplified in HW27, where one lecturer wrote, "peer dialogue gave me courage to talk about my weaknesses; reflection was no longer a lonely journey." Others (HW30) highlighted that "online platforms made it easier to communicate feedback, though unstable internet often disrupted engagement."

However, for most lecturers, reflection was performed under constraints that were both material and emotional. Many cited high workloads, large classes, and infrastructural fragilities that hindered sustained reflection. One (HW28) lamented that "time pressure forces us to rush; reflection happens on the move, not as deeply as it should." Similarly, their fellow inductee (HW8) observed, "linguistic diversity in my Nursing class is both a blessing and a challenge. It slows communication but reminds me to listen carefully." Some lecturers framed these challenges as opportunities for adaptive growth. For instance, in HW7, one lecturer states that in teaching History, turned constraint into creativity: "rurality is not a deficit. It is our epistemic resource. I use oral traditions and storytelling to connect theory to community." This reflection resonates with Behari-Leak's (2024) call for "contextualised professional development" rooted in humanising pedagogy.

Institutional contradictions, between reflective ideals and performative cultures, also surfaced. For instance, this was attested in (HW14); "we are told to reflect, but sometimes it feels like another report for compliance. True

reflection cannot be monitored; it must be nurtured." Similarly, another commented (HW20) that "reflection works only when there is trust, when the system values honesty more than perfection." Such sentiments echo Boud and Brew's (2013) argument that reflective practice flourishes only within relational, supportive ecosystems.

Despite these constraints, lecturers consistently reinterpreted reflection as an act of resilience and moral commitment. As one lecturer (HW28) poignantly observed, "teaching in under-resourced settings means surviving with purpose. Reflection keeps me grounded when the system doesn't." In this way, reflection became an ethical counter-narrative, a means of maintaining agency within institutional precarity.

Reflection as professional identity work

For many participants, reflection was not simply an exercise in self-evaluation but a process of becoming, a means of authoring professional identity. Through reflective writing, lecturers confronted uncertainty, reconciled personal values with institutional expectations, and gradually cultivated a sense of belonging. Early reflections often revealed self-doubt, where one lecturer (HW11) admitted, "at first, I wondered if I belonged here. Reflecting on my lessons helped me see that students' confusion mirrored my own need for growth." Over time, this uncertainty seemingly evolved into self-authorship.

Emotionally charged narratives pervade the data. Here, one lecturer (HW27) noted, "I used to hide my emotions, thinking professionalism meant detachment. Now I see that care and boundaries can coexist." Similarly, another homework (HW37) described the shift as spiritual: "I discovered that teaching is a calling; reflection made me realise it's about humanity, not hierarchy." These identity shifts demonstrate Mezirow's transformative learning process: through self-examination and dialogue, participants restructured their meaning perspectives and embraced teaching as moral and scholarly work. Reflection also seems to have promoted a sense of community. One homework (HW17) indicates; "our induction group became a reflective circle; sharing struggles made us stronger." This sentiment captures Wenger's (1998) idea of learning as participation in a community of practice. Reflection, in this context, served as both identity narration and collective affirmation, a dialogic practice through which new academics claimed legitimacy and voice.

Reflection, curriculum and contextual relevance

Curriculum reflection emerged as a critical site of transformation. This theme is prominent in Table 1, where lecturers across faculties connected pedagogical reflection to decolonial renewal, demonstrating that reflection transcends classroom practice to interrogate the politics of knowledge itself. Many lecturers questioned whether existing curricula spoke to the lived realities of South African students. One lecturer (HW25) argued, "Curriculum must prepare students for African challenges; otherwise, we teach irrelevance." In HW35, another lecturer went further, insisting, "we cannot keep teaching Eurocentric content and call it transformation. Curriculum must showcase African excellence." In Agriculture and Health Sciences, reflection was tied to real-world application. For instance, HW38 described integrating pre-laboratory manuals and local fieldwork: "Students learn best when they see how theory solves problems in their villages." This was echoed in HW37, that "nutrition is about life. I take students into the community so that learning is lived, not memorised."

Through these reflections, curriculum becomes a moral and political concern. Participants linked curriculum renewal to epistemic justice and decolonisation, aligning with Mezirow's concept of critical self-examination. Reflection thus appears to have operated not only as introspection but as curriculum activism, a space where lecturers reimagined what counts as legitimate knowledge.

Reflection as praxis: intersections of care, context and agency

When read holistically, the forty reflections illustrate that reflection is simultaneously a cognitive, moral, and transformative act. Lecturers described reflection as "thinking and feeling at once" (HW14), a "conversation with myself about purpose"

(HW31), and "a reminder that teaching is human work" (HW10). Such language signals reflection as praxis, a synthesis of thought and action oriented toward transformation. For many lecturers, reflection became a space of care and critique. One lecturer (HW34) wrote, "living among students in Mankweng changed how I teach. I now see that reflection begins with empathy." This was also observed in HW31, that "teaching is about reading the world my students live in; reflection keeps me aware of their struggles." These accounts position reflection as ethical responsiveness, a recognition that teaching cannot be disentangled from social and material realities.

Reflection also functioned as agency within constrained structures. In one homework (HW14) it was declared, "to reflect is to resist. It's how I reclaim my humanity in a bureaucratic system." This act of critical reflexivity exemplifies Mezirow's transformative learning in action, reflection as emancipation. As synthesised in Table 1, reflection across the dataset operates on three levels: pedagogical, ethical, and transformative. Pedagogically, it enables lecturers to adapt and innovate; ethically, it cultivates empathy and relational care; and transformatively, it empowers lecturers to question dominant paradigms and reconstruct their professional selves.

Discussion

The findings highlight reflection as a transformative praxis. Across the dataset, reflection emerges not only as a pedagogical technique but as a philosophical stance that fuses cognition, emotion, and ethics in the everyday work of teaching. The reflections show that professional learning happens in the midst of uncertainty. Lecturers restructured lessons in response to student disengagement, adapted activities around unreliable infrastructure, and used contextual examples to make abstract knowledge meaningful. These acts of improvisation echo Schön's *reflection-in-action*, where knowledge is constructed through experience rather than applied from theory. However, the lecturers' reflections also infuse Schön's model with an ethical texture absent from its original formulation. For instance, in the words of one participant, "teaching is not just an intellectual act; it's an act of love" (HW17). In under-resourced and emotionally demanding settings, reflection functions as both craft and care, as Boud and Brew (2013) contend, engaging the "affective lifeworld" of academic work.

Reflection and identity transformation

The findings highlight that within this social context, reflection becomes the language through which early-career lecturers narrate their professional identities. Many move from doubt to authorship, from isolation to relational belonging. In these transitions, Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning is apparent at work: moments of disorientation become thresholds for redefined meaning. Yet, the lecturers' transformations are not purely cognitive; they are affective and moral. Reflection functions, in Fitzmaurice's (2013) terms, as a moral apprenticeship, a practice that helps academics integrate care, authenticity, and responsibility into their professional selves. This relational and emotional dimension extends Mezirow's theory by grounding transformation in ubuntu-inflected ethics of interdependence. Lecturers write about empathy as pedagogy, about listening to students as a mode of respect, and about teaching as relational labour. Such reflections affirm Behari-Leak's (2024) assertion that professional learning in African universities must be "humanising", thus recognising emotion and context as epistemic resources. Reflection, in this sense, is a form of moral becoming: an enactment of what Barnett (2022) calls critical being, which denotes to the capacity to live and act thoughtfully within complexity.

Institutional mediation: reflection under constraint

From the findings, reflection also emerge as a practice mediated by institutional ecology. On one hand, induction structures, mentorship, and peer dialogue nurture reflection as a developmental process; on the other, managerial demands, bureaucratic workloads, and resource limitations often constrain it. Several lecturers lamented that reflection risks becoming "a report for compliance" (HW14), exposing the tension between genuine reflexivity and performative

accountability. These accounts echo Sebolao's (2019) and Baleni et al.'s (2022) critiques of managerialism's narrowing effect on professional agency.

However, rather than abandoning reflection under these conditions, participants redefined it as an act of endurance and ethical resistance, a "slow pedagogy" in a fast university. This adaptive stance exemplifies what Boud and Brew (2013) term reflection as resilience, the act of sustaining purpose within constraint. Reflection thus becomes a practice of survival, what Behari-Leak (2024) describes as a "pedagogy of endurance": a refusal to let bureaucratic velocity eclipse human intention.

Reflection and epistemic justice

Perhaps the most significant extension of reflective practice in this context lies in its epistemic turn. The findings show that reflection did not necessarily end with the self; it reached into curriculum and knowledge systems. Lecturers interrogated Eurocentric materials, questioned disciplinary boundaries, and sought to align teaching with local realities, what one called "making curriculum speak to African challenges" (HW25). Such reflective acts constitute not just pedagogical adjustment but epistemic intervention. They mirror Mezirow's (1991) critical self-examination but deepen it within a postcolonial framework: reflection as the recovery of epistemic agency.

This view aligns with the work of Leibowitz et al. (2016) and Ndebele (2023), who see reflection as an instrument of epistemic justice. Through reflection, lecturers became both teachers and curriculum activists, using pedagogical imagination to reframe what counts as legitimate knowledge. Barnett's (2022) idea of imaginative reason, thinking beyond received epistemologies, finds expression here. Reflection emerges as both critique and creation: a process of decolonising the self and the syllabus simultaneously.

Reflection as transformative praxis

When viewed holistically, the findings portray reflection as transformative praxis. In this context, it emerges as a notion of a recursive interplay of experience, critique, and reconstruction that operates across pedagogy, personal, and epistemic dimensions. It is the method of professional inquiry (after Schön), the medium of meaning reconstruction (after Mezirow), and the moral stance of critical being (after Barnett). In the South African academy, this praxis takes on a collective and ethical form, which is anchored in Leibowitz's social reflexivity and Ndebele's contextual sensitivity and animated by Behari-Leak's humanising ethos. Reflection, therefore, is not necessarily an auxiliary skill developed during induction but the architecture of professional consciousness itself. It emerges as a way of surviving, caring, and thinking critically in the midst of constraint. This study therefore extends the literature on academic induction by demonstrating that reflection is not simply a developmental exercise but a philosophical stance. It represents a moral, intellectual, and relational orientation towards teaching, one that aligns with the decolonial imperative to situate knowledge, care, and justice at the centre of higher education.

Conclusion

This study has shown that reflection, as practiced by early-career lecturers during academic induction, extends far beyond its conventional role as a professional development technique. It emerges as a transformative praxis, a recursive and situated process through which lecturers think, feel, and act their way into professional being. Drawing on Schön's reflective cycles, Mezirow's transformative learning, and Barnett's notion of critical being, reflection is revealed as both method and morality: a way of knowing and a way of living that binds cognition, emotion, and ethics. Within the South African higher education context, reflection becomes an act of survival and renewal, a form of social reflexivity through which lecturers construct meaning, reclaim agency, and humanise their pedagogical work amid systemic constraint.

The study further contributes to scholarship on academic induction and reflective practice by re-theorising reflection as a moral, relational, and epistemic project rather than a technical or cognitive skill. It advances existing frameworks by situating reflection within African higher education's historical and institutional

complexities, showing how reflective engagement can simultaneously promote professional identity, epistemic justice, and curriculum renewal. Practically, the study positions reflection as the intellectual and ethical core of academic induction, a practice through which early-career lecturers do not simply learn to teach, but learn to become.

Disclosures

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Annexture A: Participants Homework Profiles

Participant ID	Discipline / Department	Faculty / School	Contextual Focus or Role
HW1	Biochemistry, Microbiology and Biotechnology	Science & Agriculture	Lecturer integrating technology and contextual examples in teaching.
HW2	Communication Studies	Humanities	Emphasis on student engagement and interactive pedagogy.
HW3	Social Sciences	Humanities	Reflects on teaching diversity and student motivation.
HW4	Education	Education	Progressive teaching philosophy focused on student empowerment.
HW5	Health Sciences / Biochemistry	Health Sciences	Lecturer emphasising experiential learning.
HW6	Management Sciences	Management & Commerce	Student-centred learning with focus on applied business education.
HW7	History / Humanities	Humanities	Uses Afrocentric and oral historiography as reflective pedagogy.
HW8	Nursing / Health Sciences	Health Sciences	Focus on language barriers and professional ethics in training.
HW9	Criminology	Humanities/Social Sciences	Contextual teaching and applied case-based reflection.
HW10	Psychology / Humanities	Humanities	Teaching philosophy rooted in empathy and care.
HW11	Criminology	Humanities	Reflects on hybrid pedagogy and classroom diversity.
HW12	Mathematics / Education	Science & Agriculture	Inquiry-based learning and constructivist reflection.
HW13	Performing Arts / Theatre	Humanities	Critical pedagogy and art as transformative learning.
HW14	Political Science / Education	Humanities	Critical pedagogy and institutional critique.
HW15	Nursing Education	Health Sciences	Focus on structured mentoring and orientation design.
HW16	Accounting / Commerce	Management & Law	Reflective adaptation of assessment strategies.
HW17	Life Orientation / Education	Humanities/Education	Emphasis on care ethics, online engagement, and inclusivity.
HW18	Natural Sciences / Biology	Science & Agriculture	Experiential learning and student-centred reflection.

HW19	Environmental Studies	Science & Agriculture	Sustainability and reflection-in-action during fieldwork.
HW20	Education / Curriculum Studies	Humanities/Education	Collaborative reflection and student motivation.
HW21	Education (Science Education)	Humanities / Education	Constructivist approach; contextualised student engagement.
HW22	Nursing / Health Sciences	Health Sciences	Reflects on simulation-based and clinical learning challenges.
HW23	Agricultural Sciences	Science & Agriculture	Applied teaching through field-based and problem-solving pedagogy.
HW24	Administrative Support (Training role)	Institutional Support	Reflects from a non-academic, training-based perspective.
HW25	Development Planning and Management	Management & Law	Constructivist and experiential teaching in project management.
HW26	Drama / Performing Arts	Humanities	Uses theatre as a site for reflective and liberatory pedagogy.
HW27	Psychology	Humanities	Reflects on dialogue, trust, and student emotional well-being.
HW28	Clinical Medicine	Health Sciences	Practical, skill-based reflection integrating theory and clinic.
HW29	Education / Curriculum Design	Humanities/Education	Inquiry-based practice and inclusive classroom control.
HW30	Water and Sanitation	Science & Agriculture Agriculture/ Environmental Sciences	Student-centred reflection and female health awareness.
HW31	Hydrology / Water Quality Modelling	Agriculture & Environmental Sciences	Problem-based learning and rural student context.
HW32	Library and Information Science	Humanities / Information Studies	Online teaching reflection and digital pedagogy.
HW33	Law (Public & Environmental Law)	Management and Law/Law	Case-based teaching and reflective handling of student resistance.
HW34	Education / Life Sciences	Humanities / Education	Reflective empathy, care pedagogy, and contextual awareness.

HW35	Health Sciences / Biochemistry	Health Sciences	Reflection on curriculum transformation and indigenous knowledge.
HW36	Academic Development / SI Programme	Centre for Academic Excellence	Reflection on student mentorship and academic support.
HW37	Human Nutrition and Dietetics	Health Sciences	Experiential and community-based reflective pedagogy.
HW38	Agriculture (Plant Production & Pathology)	Science & Agriculture	Practical reflection-in-action and multilingual teaching context.