Rethinking support for university teachers in the context of decolonising higher education: The role of academic developers

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Abstract

The diverse histories of each of the three formerly different higher education institutions that became North-West University (NWU) continue to encourage academic developers to think strategically on effective ways to offer responsive academic development support to the students and academic staff. Tasked with a mandate to render academic development support to academic staff, postgraduate, and undergraduate students to achieve equity (not equality) of outcomes, NWU's Faculty Teaching and Learning Support (FTLS) directorate continues to rethink its strategy and approach in fulfilling its mandate long after the merging of the three historically different institutions on 1 January 2004. The directorate understands that there are common, fundamental, and core student academic development and support, and academic professional development needs across the three campuses that should be aligned, yet our engagement has shown repeatedly that such support is always situational and, inadvertently, contextual. Drawing on New Literacy Studies as theoretical lens to advance its argument, this paper used the literature review method to present the rationale for a restructured FTLS work strategy at NWU to respond better to demands for supporting the academic project in the context of decolonising higher education.

Keywords: decoloniality, academic development, academic support, centre for teaching and learning, new literacy studies

Introduction

Scholarship on higher education teaching and learning, particularly in decolonising contexts such as South Africa, has constantly emphasised the need for academics as university teachers to engage in continual and systematic inquiry into student learning (Leibowitz, 2017; Mgqwashu, et al., 2020; Vandeyar, 2020). This is more urgent in a decolonising higher education context where diverse groups of students, the majority of whom literature has described as non-traditional (Timmis et al., 2021), have already raised concerns during the

2015 #RhodesMustFall student protests. With reference to what students had to say during those protests, Shay (2016, p. 3) reminded us that many curricula "are taught in oppressive classrooms by academics who are demeaning, unprofessional, and use their power in ways that discriminate unfairly against students." Among other things, this confirms the fact that as university teachers, academics are not just "conduits of the curriculum. They are complex beings constituted amongst other things of an identity, value systems, beliefs, and lived experiences all of which inform their practice within particular contexts" (Vandeyar, 2020, p. 784).

It is these identity issues within the academy that make the role of academic developers (ADs) strategic and critical in transforming and decolonising learning and teaching spaces. The professional development opportunities they are tasked to set up are designed to foster a culture of critical reflexivity on the part of university teachers as regards the extent to which their identities enable or constrain student learning. In this paper, academic development is understood as an area of practice and research in higher education that intends to create "conditions supportive of teaching and learning, in the broadest sense" (Leibowitz, 2014, p. 359) in order to "help create learning environments that enhance educational quality" (Pleschová et al., 2012, p. 9). Given that academics are appointed primarily on the basis of their disciplinary knowledge, disciplinary expertise, and research—with teaching and learning receiving a secondary emphasis—the contribution by ADs in the academic project cannot be over-emphasised. Writing on what he called the *mystique of merit* used for academic staff appointments, Thornton (2013, p. 129) pointed out that:

> Faith in the idea of an unequivocal "best person" arises from the belief that merit is a neutral and apolitical variable. . . . The objective element comprises a candidate's qualifications, employment history, grants, publications, *teaching areas* [my emphasis], PhD completions, etc—the type of information appearing on an academic's CV—but a literal approach makes no sense without interpretation. From which institution were the qualifications obtained? What is the standing of that institution? Is the candidate's work history relevant? Are the publications refereed? What is the standing of the journals in which they appear or, in the case of books, the publishing houses that published them? How significant is the body of research? How original and creative is it? What impact has the candidate's scholarship had? And so on.

As evidenced in Thornton's words above, academic appointments appear not to treat the role of academics as teachers with the same scrutiny as research productivity. As I will attempt to show in this paper, the role of the ADs in the context discussed is that of fostering synergies between academics' disciplinary knowledge and their development as university teachers—an idea van Dijk (2022) and her colleagues developed concisely in their paper, "Connecting Academics' Disciplinary Knowledge to Their Professional Development as University Teachers: A Conceptual Analysis of Teacher Expertise and Teacher Knowledge."

By means of well-designed seminars or workshops that enhance academics' professional responsibilities as university teachers, North-West University (NWU) shares a commitment

with national government's National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2018). This framework has at its core, the improvement of the quality of university teaching, with a primary purpose to serve as a guide to the higher education system for developing and implementing strategies to enhance academics as university teachers. Thus, the aim of the framework is to promote professional development and recognition of academics as university teachers through, inter alia, more consistent and equitable access to professional development opportunities. These efforts are in response to increased enrolments of students from diverse ranges of demographic, socioeconomic, attitudinal, and educational backgrounds.

For the purposes of this paper, I focus on one of the universities that experienced enhanced complexities due to the 1 January 2004 merging of three historically different institutions that are spread across two provinces (North-West and Gauteng). This merging included the former University of North-West, which is located in the former Bophuthatswana Homeland and comprises mainly Black people in terms of staff and students. The second institution was Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education in Potchefstroom, a town formerly designated for the White Afrikaner population by the apartheid regime, and relatively dominated by White people in terms of staff and students. The third institution in the merger was the Sebokeng Campus of the former Vista University, another Black-populated university in terms of staff and students. Thus, staff and students of the three demographically different universities were incorporated into NWU. NWU's commitment to aligning its academic programmes, qualifications, and modules to ensure that every student across the three campuses experienced the same educational experience, received the same quality education, and had access to the necessary resources for success, placed a crucial role on ADs.

This role expectation of ADs became understandable given that the merger brought into the same learning space, students with a diverse range of needs that university teachers in most higher education institutions (HEIs) were either not prepared for, or were insufficiently equipped to respond to (Strydom et al., 2017). The three original HEIs and their academic staff had distinct histories and human, financial, and educational resources that influenced their classroom practices. Prior to the merger, these HEIs had separately enrolled and taught student populations who had been differentially prepared for tertiary education (Pretorius, 2017). Thus, regardless of those obvious challenges and conundrums, the institutions were expected to attain the same goals. As part of the national building discourse and imperative, they needed to work together to ensure academic programmes and diverse students' experiences were aligned and of the same quality. University teachers realised that this expected task required ADs' capacitation to build on academic staff's disciplinary expertise for professionalism and responsiveness. The task would enable academics to keep the student voice in mind as they were developed to embrace responsive curricula and through teaching and assessment, ensure equity of opportunity for success.

This challenge is not unique to South Africa. It is equally a global concern because HEIs around the world have had to respond to students with different prior learning experiences to

those of traditional or mainstream students (Timmis et al., 2021). In post-conflict, decolonising societies globally, this more diversified undergraduate student population has included "first-in-family," "non-traditional," "historically under-represented," and "atypical" students—descriptors that have also been applied to students from low-income households (Fry et al., 2009). These students experience exclusionary university education influenced by their economic backgrounds. In other words, teaching and learning in most HEIs tends to privilege the elite, with a limited number of students whose backgrounds and socialisation articulate with the values and norms that have shaped higher education. Thus, the privileged often come to university possessing the values and norms, practices, and aptitude valued in formal learning contexts, making their transition from home to university a seamless experience (Mgqwashu, 2009). Due to a global unequal distribution of wealth and societal resources, students from marginalised communities experience tertiary education as alienating and with a sense of non-belonging (Mgqwashu et al., 2020).

It is in this context that the role of ADs is crucial. Their contribution lies in challenging and engaging academic staff as university teachers to consider the pedagogical practices required to enable the marginalised to access the knowledge needed to navigate higher education—without alienating students from privileged backgrounds. This is particularly important in a country where a transition from an education system and policies that privileged mainstream cultures, to one that is democratic and is committed to equal participation, is under way. By pedagogical practices, or what Bernstein (1990) called pedagogic discourse, I mean a combination of content selection and framing as well as teaching, pacing, and assessment practices.

This brief literature review necessitated a shift in strategy by the Faculty Teaching and Learning Support (FTLS) directorate of NWU's Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), which resulted in adaptation of daily operations in order to respond efficiently to supporting academics as university teachers. Owing to the changes discussed in the following sections of this paper, the thrust of ADs' work became that of drawing from latest scholarship and research to perform the task of supporting academics as university teachers. This involved persuading academic departments to appreciate the learning and teaching implications of the merger of three historically different universities into one university, the accompanying massification of higher education more broadly, and thus the need to make explicit the "language codes" of their disciplines across the curricula as daily classroom practice. In other words, the focus of ADs' work was to encourage university teachers to embrace pedagogic approaches that would democratise learning and their classrooms as a way to ensure all students had equal opportunity to succeed.

Selected ideas on the subject

In most decolonising contexts, there are ongoing debates on the extent to which the theoretical underpinnings that inform pedagogical choices and assessment practices in most HEIs still favour the colonial enterprise. By colonial enterprise, I mean the tendencies (that begin from Northern research methodologies) to exclude:

[from] knowledge production the formerly colonised, historically marginalized, and oppressed groups, which today are most often represented . . . [by] broad categories of non-Western, third-world, developing, underdeveloped, First Nations, Indigenous Peoples, third-world women, African American women, and so on. (Chilisa, 2012, pp. 1–2)

Leibowitz (2017) has also expressed concerns about the slowness with which scholarship on theorising teaching and learning from a decolonial lens for higher education has been evolving. She noted that scholarship on theorising teaching and learning has "mainly been produced in the West, and within the discourses and paradigms emanating from the West" (Leibowitz (2017, p. 95). The implications for ADs' work in this regard is that it ought to involve deliberateness in unsettling dominant teaching and learning discourses that are not responsive to the South African context and end with excluding the majority of students. It is the task of an AD to encourage university teachers to appreciate the fact that pedagogic discourse is "a principle by which other discourses are appropriated and brought into a special relationship with each other, for the purpose of their selective transmission and acquisition" (Bernstein (1996, p. 47). However, if the theories that produce knowledge on teaching and learning are produced in the North, "what would be the means for students who do not share social worlds with the world where such theory is developed, to engage with . . . knowledge? How would they come to know it?" (Leibowitz, 2017, p. 96).

Because in modern societies limited attention is given to these questions, Bernstein (1996) has argued that formal education curricula in these contexts perpetuate the class system. In other words, it reproduces the hierarchical order of a class-based society. By curriculum, Bernstein meant what is defined as knowledge. Transmitted knowledge (or content) is a selection of knowledge. Some knowledge is regarded as appropriate whereas other knowledge is not. The fact that students coming from low-literate families and low-income homes tend to have less access to written stories means that they are more likely to find it difficult to engage with written texts, which are legitimated as the carriers of knowledge. Oral tradition, a dominant discourse in many African contexts and an established carrier of knowledge, does not feature prominently in formal education—either as a legitimate medium for knowledge generation or as a valid tool for assessment.

Within our current undemocratic education system and traditions, as Bernstein (1990, p. 75) put it, "the age by which a child should be able to read is a function of the sequencing rules of the pedagogic practice of the school." By constructing written texts (at the exclusion of oral ones) as the medium for curriculum contents, formal education "acknowledge[s] the fact that these contents are transmitted primarily through reading, and that their acquisition is demonstrated primarily through writing" (Rose, 2005, p. 132). As a result, the focus of educational practice at all levels is on transmitting curriculum contents—rather than on the literacy skills needed to acquire such contents. A shift in focus from simply transmitting curriculum contents to prioritising the development of the literacy skills needed to acquire such contents is long overdue. Scholars have argued that resistance to this shift has ensured that teaching methods are not "responsive to or consistent with the sociocultural background

and educational needs of African learners" (Lebakeng et al., 2006, p. 78). I argue that without these necessary skills, students outside mainstream cultures can neither succeed with their homework nor engage with classroom activities at the level expected of their grade (Rose, 2005).

Rose (2005, p. 136) challenged this focus on transmitting curriculum content, and argued that it makes no difference if these contents are taught "in terms of academic subjects, of personal or cultural growth, or of a critical stance; they all serve to mask the underlying skills required for acquiring these contents." In other words, a focus on how to learn as opposed to what to learn is missing in formal education from primary to tertiary level. Such a shift would need to incorporate ways of learning characteristic of Indigenous cultures, traditions, and ways of being, as well as Western ones. As Lebakeng et al. put it,

> In advocating for the reversal of epistemicide, we necessarily seek to place Indigenous knowledge systems of the conquered peoples of South Africa on the same level of parity with other epistemological paradigms to achieve both formal and substantive equality. (2006, p. 76)

A pedagogic practice that insists on transmitting curriculum content without asking where that content is from, who created it, and at whose expense, and that ignores teaching how to learn, culminates in the transmission of what Rose (2005, p. 136) referred to as a "'hidden curriculum'—classroom practices that engage and enable different learners unequally." This is a consequence of focusing on transmitting curriculum content that misrecognises its recipients and ignores the need to develop the literacy skills they require to master such content. In other words, the skills of reading and learning from prescribed written texts to learn independently from the content are often linked to competence models of education and reading competence. These are competencies that learners are assumed to have acquired prior to entering school or university, which is why literacy development curricula tend to completely ignore explicit instruction in reading and writing beyond the level of junior primary school (Rose & Martin, 2012). This is typical of pedagogical practices that evolved to favour those who, prior to schooling, were exposed to the literacies legitimated in formal education.

South Africa is equally trapped by these pedagogical practices. They evolved in the West and are designed to favour the elite (mainly White and middle class) and marginalise the majority (mainly Black students from rural and township areas). Put differently, we are trapped by coloniality, a mindset that considers everything Euro-American to be superior and standard, and everything else as other (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). We are trapped in discourses that normalise the supremacy and infallibility of Euro-American cultures, ideas, worldviews, and definitions of the world. As I will attempt to show in this paper, ADs have a role to play in professionalising academics as university teachers to embrace the decolonial project. Among other things, this is a commitment to undo Western pedagogic practices designed to privilege the elite, and marginalise students from non-mainstream cultures (Rose, 2005).

By means of referring to a specific context in which a strategic rethinking of the approach to support the academic project occurred, this paper suggests a possible role ADs could play to ensure student diversity and the campus histories of the three merged universities be turned into an opportunity rather than the problem. This is the reason that this paper discusses the rationale for the decisions that informed the rethinking of the strategy of professionalising academics as university teachers in a merged university. Given that NWU had committed to align its academic programmes, qualifications, and modules, the change of strategy discussed in this paper was necessary because it reflected a commitment to capacitate university teachers in ways that would enable them to be responsive in their curricular development, pedagogies, as well as assessment. This is crucial so that every student from across the three campuses undergoes the same educational experience, and receives the same quality education to ensure educational success.

Theoretical lens to understanding the phenomenon

The paper proposes New Literacy Studies as the overarching theoretical lens through which the rethinking of the strategy for academic development work was conceptualised. Gee (1990, 1998), one of the founders of the New Literacy Studies group, contributed to a theory of literacy-as-social-practice through theorising the notion of *discourse*. He defined discourse as:

> A socially accepted association among ways of using language, thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network" or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful "role." Gee (1990, p. 143)

Gee's (1990) definition of literacy is equally pertinent in the way the work reported in this paper is conceptualised. For him, literacy meant "mastery or fluent control over a secondary discourse" (Gee, 1990, p. 153). Both definitions may be said to present discourse and literacy as encompassing more than language or literacies to include not only ways of speaking, reading, and writing within particular contexts, but also ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, and believing that are acceptable within specific groups of people in particular contexts. This understanding offered the teams of ADs the necessary tools to professionalise and capacitate academic staff as university teachers and see teaching in the university as an attempt to induct students into specific disciplinary identities. Indeed, according to Gee (in Boughey & McKenna, 2016), a discourse therefore encapsulates a socially recognisable identity and way of being in the world. As university teachers, the academics were enabled by ADs to understand that students acquire ways of being through exposure to the discipline-specific spaces in which they have enrolled. That is why the sociocultural backgrounds of students either enhance or inhibit their success in HEIs. In order to present the rationale for the shift in the ways ADs had previously enacted their roles, and how and why the strategic approach in this work was affected, this paper draws upon three core theoretical constructs emanating from Gee's work (2003), namely, *semiotic domains, affinity groups,* and *design grammars.*

Semiotic domains are contexts characterised by groups who hold distinctive social practices with content that is constantly changed and negotiated among the participants. In many respects, different academic disciplines in which students are enrolled typify semiotic domains. People in disciplines possess very particular meaning-making mechanisms, which manifest through interactions through words, sounds, gestures, and images. These are not static objects (defined as a body of unchanging content knowledge), but are always evolving as new knowledge pushes the boundaries of what is currently known. Closely associated with the notion of semiotic domains is the notion of affinity groups. These are groups of people who share semiotic domains and amongst whom familiar knowledge, skills, tools, and resources are distributed and utilised in ways that are valued and accepted within a group. They thus share sets of practices, goals, values, and norms associated with the semiotic domain. Members of each of these groups can also be referred to as *insiders* (Mgqwashu, 2011). Mastering a semiotic domain can thus be said to involve joining an affinity group as an apprentice. For this reason, academic disciplines are semiotic domains into which students are supposed to be apprenticed by affinity groups within them—the academics who are members or insiders. It is here where the apprenticing of students through a deliberate, inclusive pedagogical approach is crucial.

This pedagogical approach is realised through scaffolding students' learning within a semiotic domain into discipline-specific design grammars. According to Gee (2003), every semiotic domain has a design grammar. In simple terms, a design grammar is a set of principles or patterns through which linguistic materials and practices in the domain are combined to communicate subject-specific meanings. Gee (2003) further distinguished between the internal design grammar (ways in which the content of the semiotic domain is presented) and the external design grammar (the ongoing social practices that determine the principles and patterns through which the semiotic domain communicates meanings). Thus, for academic access, and success to be a reality, students need to learn how to participate successfully in an affinity group and master the design grammars of the semiotic domain.

A pedagogical approach that is informed by this theorisation has a decolonising potential. This is because colonial pedagogies tend to be opaque to the majority of students because they presuppose cognitive abilities and worldviews about students without verifying their existence. Yet, it is towards these very tendencies to which curricular choices, pedagogy, and assessment are biased. These pedagogies tend to speak to and favour the elite, and marginalise the majority of students who have now become a critical part of HEIs due to the long overdue massification of higher education that occurred in the early 1990s in South Africa (Mgqwashu, 2009).

Decolonial pedagogies, on the other hand, make explicit the invisible meta-linguistic traditions that have been shaping disciplinary discourses for centuries, as well as draw from (or at least point students to) different and alternative knowledge traditions to enhance access to the thinking and speaking habits of the affinity group into which students are inducted. This is because decolonial pedagogies take seriously the fact that the world is certainly larger

than Europe and America, and therefore cannot confine the next generation of knowledge producers to northern hemisphere epistemologies only.

Limitations to an academic developer's role

One of the opportunities that NWU's CTL has in comparison with similar centres in other merged South African universities is that it is supposed to support academics and students within a very complex university. First, its two biggest campuses, Mahikeng (MC) and Potchefstroom (PC), are 201 kilometres apart. The distance between Mahikeng and Vanderbijlpark (VC) is 276 kilometres, and between the Potchefstroom and Vanderbijlpark campuses, the distance is 76 kilometres. To add to this, academic programmes, qualifications, and modules are aligned—with delivery of the same content occurring in all the three campuses, sometimes synchronously and online by the same academic staff to students across the three sites, sometimes face-to-face in one campus at a time, and sometimes asynchronously via online recorded videos. With a population of 44,139 (Black: 30,387; White: 11,664; Coloured: 1,574; Asian: 474; Other: 40) students in 2022 (NWU, 2023), and the fact that prior to the merger each campus was an independent university with its own academic programmes, the ADs' role required continuous serious strategic rethinking.

Although these complications could be viewed as a challenge, they presented the FTLS directorate in the CTL an opportunity to rethink its daily operations, restrategise its approach to supporting the academic project, and to seriously consider an alternative approach to establishing the motivation for offering which type of support, to whom, when, and how. These reconsiderations emerged out of the recognition of the real and urgent need to be responsive to the exigencies brought by the merger. In the process, there was recognition of the lack, or in some cases absence, of a scientific grounded database on which support to university teachers and students was needed and rendered. Most of the work was generated through faculty-specific requests, as well as from directives by senior management (often the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Teaching and Learning). From the FTLS team's side, there seemed to be no research-driven, evidence-based and latest scholarship-led initiatives that informed daily work. Through the help of eight CTL faculty leads, who were assigned to each faculty and had a team of 10 members or more under them, faculty requests reached the FTLS team. These requests seemed to be the major motivation for engaging with academic staff as well as with students.

Given the specificity of the challenges owing to the different demographics and histories of both our students and staff at all the three campuses, the CTL faculty teams model and its effectiveness in supporting students and academic staff across the three campuses proved to be largely compromised. Having a CTL faculty lead stationed at one campus to look after a faculty that had academic staff members and students located across three campuses was a significant reason for the appearance of limited impact and effectiveness of the model. At best, CTL faculty leads also seemed to have been doing more work themselves than members within their individual teams of 10 or more staff members. In turn, this work by a team lead tended to concentrate mainly on the campus where the team lead was located, leaving

academics at other campuses less attended to and, essentially, fragmenting the FTLS directorate in terms of the support it was meant to offer to all faculty academic staff and students.

The other aspect that seemed to have undermined the CTL faculty teams model was the principle that guided membership. Even though it is impossible to have expertise, qualifications, and experience as the only requirements for colleagues to join a specific CTL faculty team, it seemed that part of the reason a team lead accepted more responsibility than they had to, had to do with the limited knowledge of the faculty they were assigned to and the disciplines in it. In cases where a CTL faculty team lead or some of the members held a qualification from the same faculty, healthy working relationships with academics in that faculty were noticeable. These concerns necessitated an urgent need to address the way FTLS worked. There was certainly a commitment to strengthen the work of the CTL faculty teams model—but without compromising the specific needs of each campus. To realise this, a relook at the FTLS team distribution and structure was the first response. It is in this regard that New Literacy Studies was helpful.

To respond to these concerns, there was reliance on latest scholarship and research from the field of higher education studies more broadly, and the concepts discussed earlier from New Literacy Studies. More specifically, to engage with faculties at Teaching and Learning Committee meetings, FTLS drew from Gee's (2003) semiotic domains, affinity groups, and design grammars to agitate for the need to revisit pedagogic practices, assessment, and curricular design and development. These engagements gave rise to the development of healthy and collegial spaces for critical dialogue with academic staff—first at schools levels, and then at subject group levels. Senior faculty leadership gave FTLS opportunities to present various scenarios that, until then, compromised ADs' work within the faculties.

Rethinking an academic development support strategy

Under the FTLS leadership, fellow CTL directors from the other two directorates were invited to engage with the outcomes of the deliberations that occured between FTLS and the eight faculties. The FTLS leadership was consequently committed to ensuring that, contrary to the CTL faculty teams model, the new approach to supporting the academic project by ADs needed to enable all FTLS members of staff to support all the eight faculties, without being confined to one faculty. After receiving support from fellow directors within CTL to present a revised strategy to support the academic project in ways that were designed to address all the stumbling blocks revealed by preliminary findings about the CTL faculty teams model, a revised FTLS team distribution and structure across the three campuses was developed. Figure 1 is a representation of how the team was revised:

Figure 1
Revised team distribution and structure
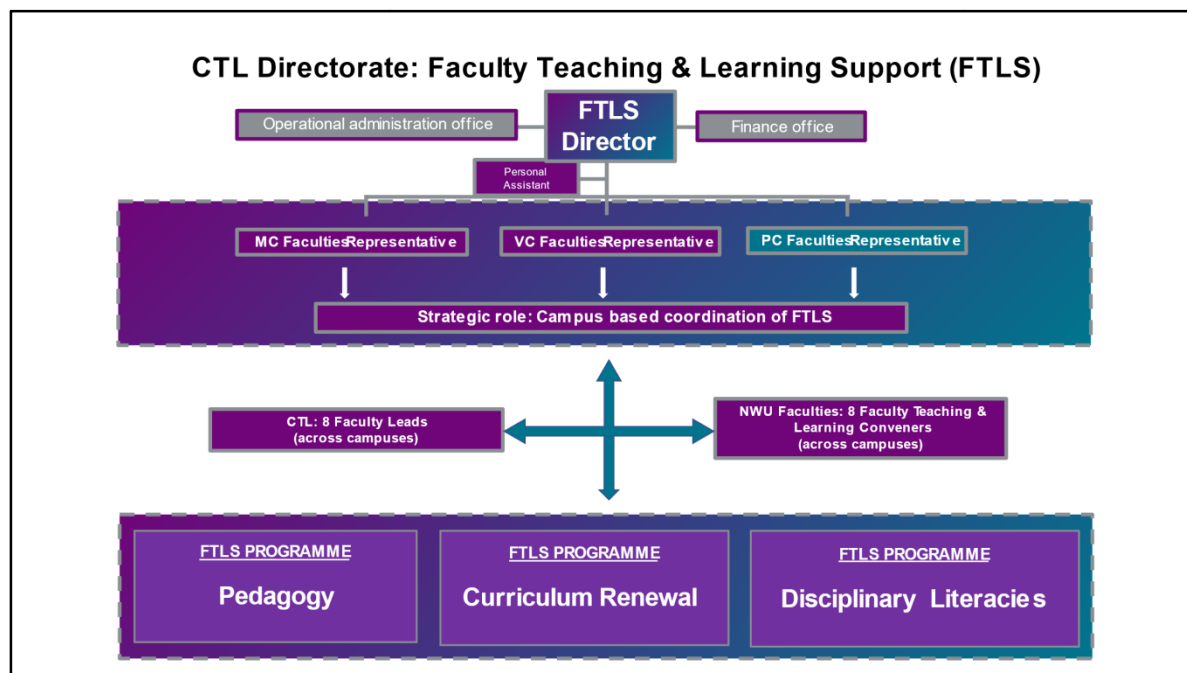
To realise its goals, the team was changed from having one faculty lead per campus (with 10 or more team members under them), to identifying a campus representative per teaching site. These three representatives, one per campus, had a responsibility to coordinate campus-based faculty requests from all the eight faculties. This did not take the faculty lead role away. What it did, however, was enable FTLS to extend its footprint in each faculty by having one person to coordinate the list of all campus-based faculty needs, a task a faculty lead could not add into their already large workload. In addition to this, FTLS negotiated with faculties to create a faculty teaching and learning convener role. This role enabled FTLS to have a contact point within faculties, someone who assembled all faculty academic development support needs to pass them on to a campus representative. These decisions were made to create a smooth working relationship between faculties and FTLS, and to ensure someone was tracing and recording progress on the support rendered by FTLS. To ensure academic leadership and that the new strategy was research-led, scholarly informed, and responsive to the unique character of NWU, the further creation of three sets of teams was undertaken. Unlike the other teams, which were designed for operation reasons, these teams were to become communities of practice that were to immerse themselves in current thinking on higher education AD role scholarship.

To realise the objective of being scholarly in our approach to supporting the academic project, we drew from Gee's concepts (semiotic domains, affinity groups, and design grammars) to set up three community of practice programmes, with each assigned 12–15 staff members. The name of each community of practice programme was aligned to Bernstein's (1975) pedagogical theory on formal educational knowledge and how it is realised. For Bernstein (1975), formal education knowledge can be realised through curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation. FTLS derived the names of the three programmes from this Bernsteinian

formulation and gave each programme a name: Pedagogy, Curriculum Renewal, and Disciplinary Literacies. Figure 2 below shows the academic focus of each of the three programme teams.

**Figure 2**
Revised strategy: Three FTLS programmes
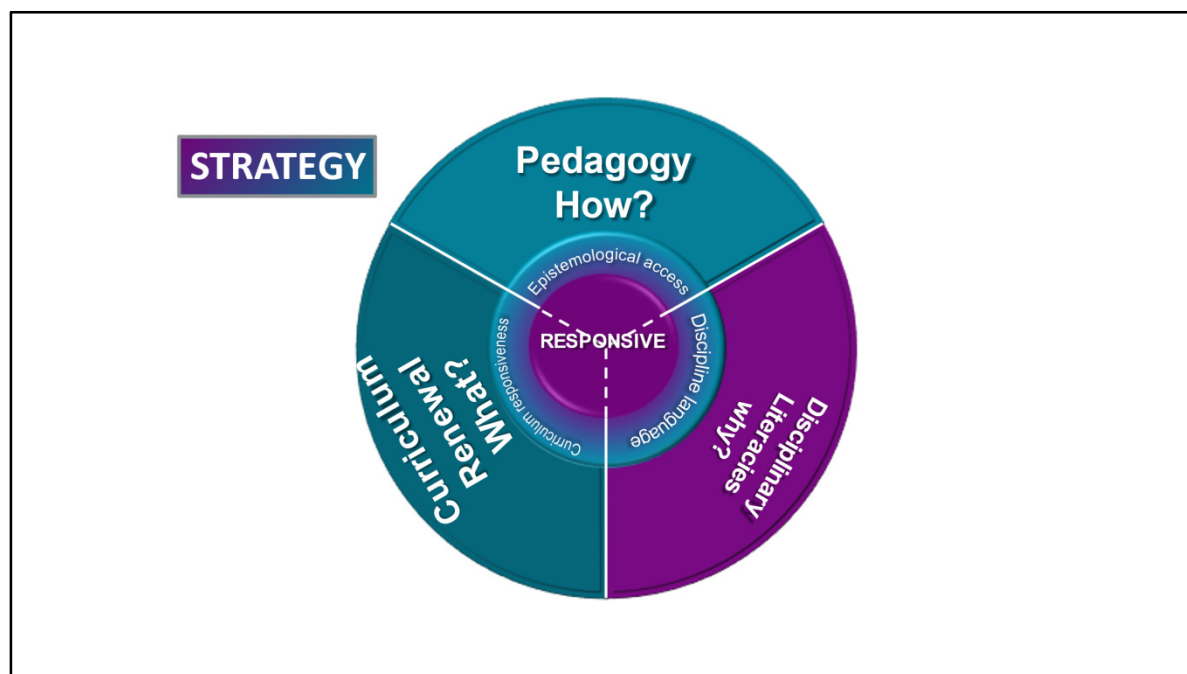
To ensure cross campus coordination of scholarly engagement with latest thinking in each of the three areas, the leadership of each programme came from all staff across the three campuses. One from the MC and one from the VC were responsible to lead Pedagogy, one from the PC and one from the MC were responsible to lead Disciplinary Literacies, and one from the MC and one from the PC were responsible to lead Curriculum Renewal. Given that the main task was to support the academic project, it was necessary to ensure conceptual coherence in the team's approach to supporting academic staff and students in all faculties. To achieve this conceptual coherence within and across programmes, a specific theoretical lens that aligned with each concept from Gee's work (2003) was identified. We selected Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TiLT) for Pedagogy (aligns with affinity groups), Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) for Curriculum Renewal (aligns with semiotic domains), and Genre Theory (GT) for Disciplinary Literacies (aligns with design grammars).

Put simply, TiLT is a learning and teaching framework that employs a set of teaching strategies with a focus on making transparent to students how and why they are learning and engaging with course content in particular ways. LCT is a framework for understanding and changing knowledge practices in different areas of social life. It allows people to explore the "rules of the game" in different fields and to then develop ways of teaching more people to succeed, or to change those rules. GT, on the other hand, is a collective term used to describe theoretical approaches that are concerned with how similar situations generate typified responses called genres, which serve as a platform for both creating an understanding based

on shared expectations and also shaping the social context. While TiLT was helping the team to capacitate academic staff with skills to make explicit to students why certain choices were made during learning events, LCT gave the team tools to empower academics to be transparent about what counts as knowledge in their chosen fields, and GT was drawn upon by the team to capacitate academics on helping students learn how to make meaning within their disciplines. Figure 3 illustrates these conceptual choices that enabled the FTLS team to execute its tasks.

Figure 3
FTLS conceptual lenses to support academic project
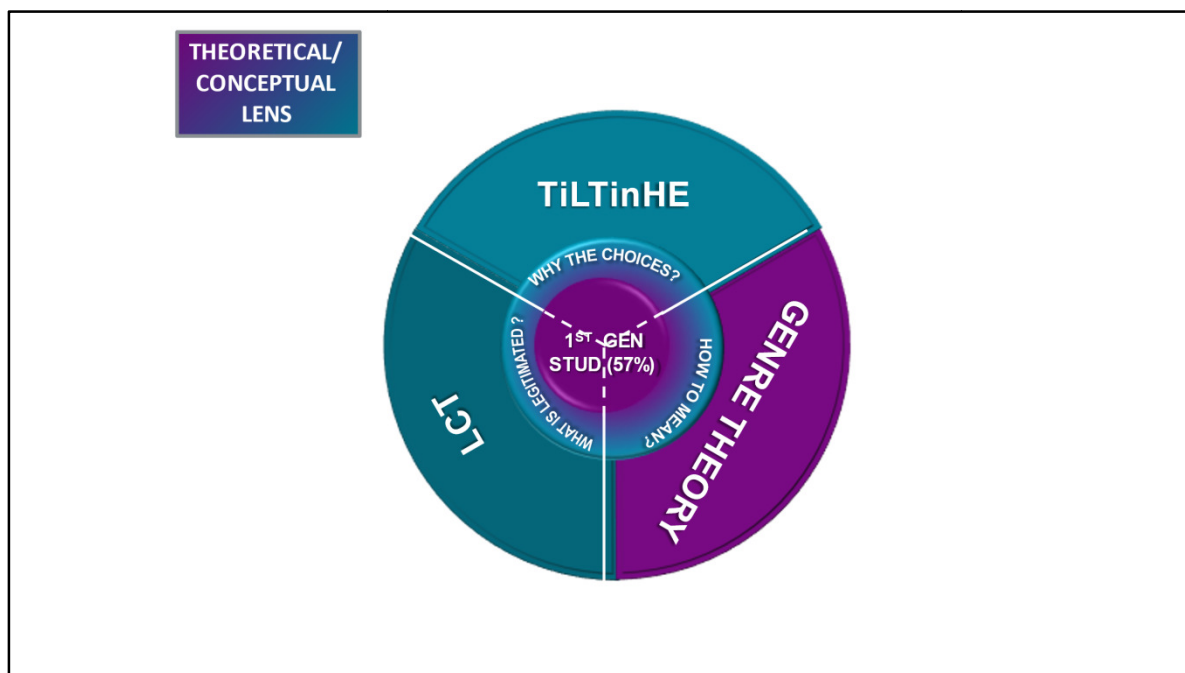
Finally, to ensure each member within each programme was sufficiently capacitated to develop a working knowledge of each theoretical lens and to carry out their tasks within their programme from a scholarly perspective—but also to create an awareness of how each programme constructed itself from a scholarship point of view—a series of three workshops on TiLT, LCT, and GT were organised. Although each FTLS team member was assigned into a specific programme, everyone was invited to a 3-day workshop at which the theoretical and conceptual ideas upon which each programme drew were elaborated upon. This was a strategy to ensure each FTLS staff member carried out their tasks from an informed basis, and with confidence and dignity. In addition to this workshop, each programme had to hold fortnightly reading sessions on relevant latest literature related to the theoretical lens and concepts (TiLT, LCT, GT) they needed to draw upon as they supported teaching (academic staff development) and learning (student support) in faculties. This ensured that not just a coordinator in a campus was confident to support academic staff and students in a faculty, but each member could also do so with great skill and confidence.

This approach proved effective because it ensured that every member acquired the necessary theoretical working understanding about what they needed to do and how to execute their

tasks from a theoretical base. Because they attended to academic staff or students' needs across disciplinary areas, latest thinking and scholarship on academic development continued to be the resource from which to draw. What this did for FTLS as well was that it broke the "wall of separation" between ADs and student advisors. This is because the theories selected offer ideas and practical strategies for both student support and academic staff development in their role as university teachers. Thus, any member of the programme could now be called upon to support teaching and learning in any faculty and all campuses, and students or academic staff alike. As a strategic meeting point, it was prudent to identify entry points into faculties. The custodians of the academic project within faculties were such points of entry, as illustrated in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**
Strategic entry points into faculties
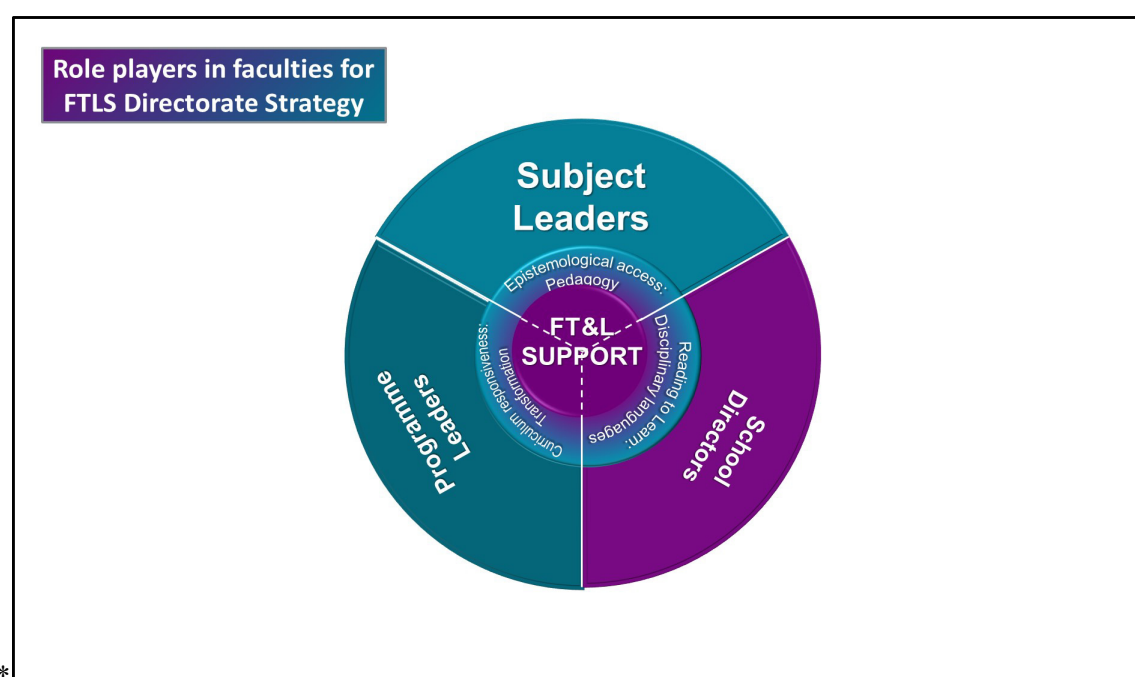
In their middle-management role, school directors oversee the disciplinary cognateness and affinity in ways that facilitate a school's academic identity, programme leaders need to quality assure the academic integrity of the programme in as far as module and course combinations are concerned, and subject leaders have a task to oversee the extent to which pedagogic practices enabled learning and academic success for all students. This understanding of the role of each role-player within faculties empowered the FTLS team to understand how to engage with each of the faculty members.

To further strengthen this scientific and scholarly approach to supporting the academic project, FTLS decided to add the generation of base-line data on the basis of which the FTLS teams could approach faculties. This was designed to add an additional reason for approaching a faculty to offer support to academic staff and students. We identified data sources to include middle managers of schools and student representatives within faculties that are spread across the three campuses. Such data were generated and added into the

existing individual day-to-day requests from lecturers. The team was convinced that a systematic, scholarly, and triangulated approach to generating data that would inform our Student Academic Development & Support as well as Academic Professional Development initiatives was the best option.

All these choices ensured a collaborative approach between FTLS and faculties to develop faculty support activities that needed to be planned and put in place for the duration of one year. Decisions on when, why, and how we developed workshops for students and academic staff, organised seminars and curriculum conversations within faculties, or invited international scholars and innovative local and international researchers in specific fields of study, were made collegially and collaboratively with faculties. Figure 5 illustrates this triangulated data generation system we came up with to ensure the running of consultative meetings because of which, support would be provided to faculties.

Figure 5
Consultative meetings for negotiated collaboration between faculties and CTL
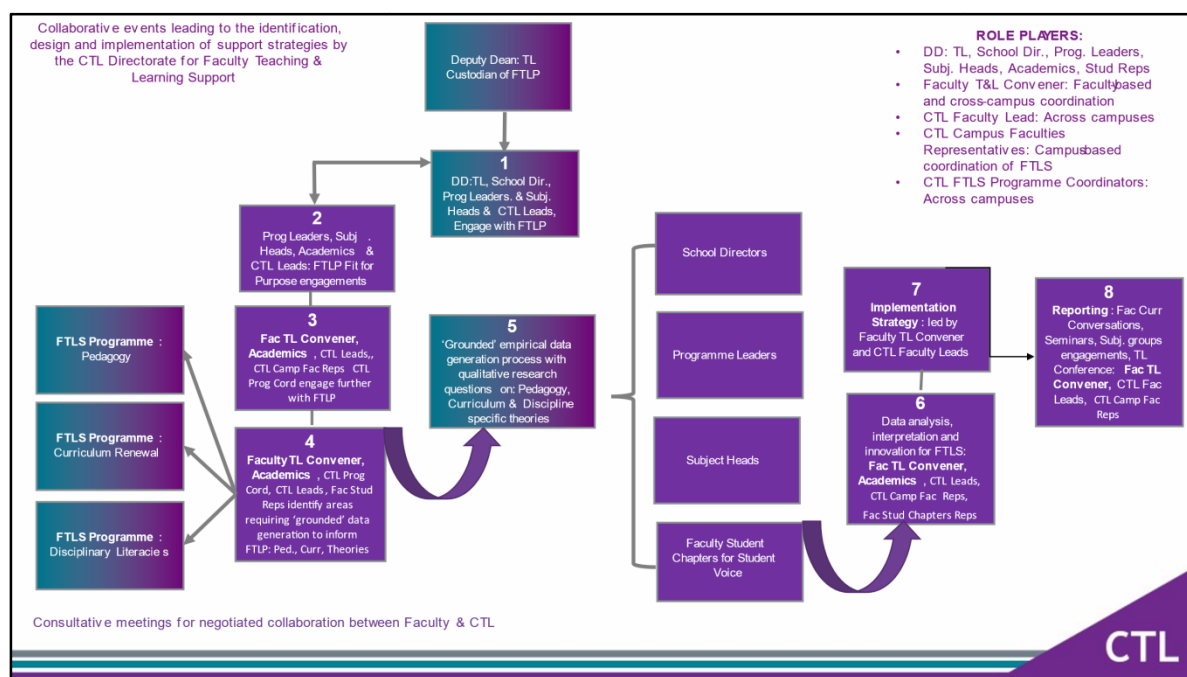
Data that emerged from these consultative meetings were analysed, interpreted, and presented thematically for discussion at the respective faculty's Teaching & Learning Committee meetings by the FTLS teams, together with campus-based faculty representative coordinators. Input from faculties via the faculty's Teaching & Learning Committee meetings was invited to shape further deliberations within CTL. Such deliberations were between the FTLS director and the CTL faculty representative coordinators. Thus, the nature and form that faculty interventions took were determined by grounded data generated about a faculty at a specific site of delivery. Where there was evidence from data that an intervention for a specific faculty needed to be aligned across the three campuses, this was done. In cases where data revealed that each campus' data suggested a different intervention or some variations of the same intervention even though it was the same faculty, a response was developed

accordingly. This is where the role of the CTL faculty representative coordinators was crucial. In collaboration with other directors within the three CTL directorates, the FTLS director offered academic leadership that eventually determined the nature of the interventions that would endeavour to be campus, faculty, and discipline specific.

Concluding reflections

Despite the challenges that came with being one university as a result of the merging of three formerly distinct HEIs, senior leadership in FTLS (one of the directorates in the CTL at NWU) initiated a scholarly informed and research-led rethinking of the academic support strategy offered to university teachers. This rethinking of the strategic approach to supporting the academic project was accompanied by reorganisation of the team within FTLS, as well as making bridges that enabled ADs to enter faculties as partners with middle managers and academics. This strategy proved useful because it resulted in support that had a decolonising effect on pedagogic practices that tended to be opaque, and thus exclusionary. The co-construction of grounded data between faculty membership and ADs engendered the collaboration between the CTL and faculties with a collective commitment to see the problem as that of NWU, and not just for one of the parties. The fact that there are three campuses did not deter FTLS. There was recognition that even though some academic development work could be aligned, engagement in supporting the academic project proved time and again that support is always situational and, inadvertently, contextual. The New Literacy Studies' three concepts, combined with the conceptualisation developed from TiLT, LCT, and GT, enabled the FTLS team's rethinking of its strategy to reach this conclusion. The work is ongoing, but the foundation that has been laid as discussed in this paper, will remain a strong point of departure for years to come.

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