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Researching academic literacies in the digital university: considering individual accounts and network practice (0167)

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This paper raises methodological questions about researching academic literacies in the digital university. It speaks directly to the conference theme, in addressing what higher education research can tell us about being part of a global and technological higher education community, but challenges any assumption that this can be understood primarily through capturing the individual experiences of the different members of this community. In elaborating this position, the author argues that work broadly conceptualised as actor network theory (Law 2009) offers a valuable complementary perspective to academic literacies research (Lillis & Scott 2007), which has tended to pay close attention to individual - rather than network- accounts of practice.

To date, the literacies as social and cultural practice frame has been evidently robust in dealing with textual practice in the academy and taking account of particular historical manifestations of materiality, including multimodality and semiotic resource (Kress 2003). Researchers adopting this approach have tended to work with established categories and binaries. These include: distinguishing between academics' and students' textual and technological practices; focusing on writing and assessment; articulating the relationship between individual identity and meaning making; identifying gaps between student and teacher understandings - particularly around feedback; positioning teachers as authoritative and powerful and students' as relatively powerless.
For academic literacies researchers there has been a tendency in both data collection and analysis to foreground familiar categories, practices and concerns. For example, the student/teacher dyad offers an organising principle, with meaning making identified in the practices of individual students and academics. However, some literacies researchers (see, Hamilton 2012) have also found synergy with approaches which have emerged from actor network theory (ANT) and earlier related work in science and technology studies

(Latour & Woolgar 1979; Latour 1987). The complementarity of this field is increasingly evident as research on literacies and technologies are being elided and literacies researchers look to expand their repertoire of resources to help them make sense of changing institutional contexts (Morgan et al 2002).

A concern with literacy in the digital university (Goodfellow & Lea 2013) forces us to ask questions about what we take for granted as literacies researchers in higher education. ANT can help us to interrogate and rethink our categories and begin to take account of practices being enacted in emerging and powerful networks. This orientation might involve, for example, a consideration of staff and students as part of the same network engaged in a myriad of knowledge making practices- challenging the familiar student/teacher dyad. It can also help us to consider the idea of knowledge as network practice rather than foregrounding the student learner through a lens of agency, identity and individual processes of meaning making. It can make visible the interplay between different networks in the digital university. Academic literacies researchers tend to work with entities, people and artefacts: students, teachers, assignments, feedback, policy documents but as Fenwick and Edwards (2012) argue these are actually assemblages of myriad things which order and govern practices in particular ways. Seen through an ANT lens they are precarious networks that take a lot of work to sustain them. Fenwick and Edwards suggest that there is always the potential for counter networks, alternative forms and spaces to develop, with some networks being more powerful than others. There is always tension between different networks and their enactment; this pull and push between networks is at the heart of how the university - and the higher education community - is constantly reinventing itself. ANTs concern with network is with respect to how different realities relate to one another and in exploring how such a patchwork of realities may be enacted in other ways (Law 2009). Law's perspective leads us to ask questions about how we have assembled academic literacies and, in the process, may have failed to see other things, in particular the power of institutional networks over and above the activities of particular groups of people such as students and academics.

There is a relentless drive in higher education to both stabilise the digital and align it uncritically with literacy. The predominant orientation of universities with regard to technologies is a concern with entities, not as complex sets of contested texts, processes and

practices but as named things which can be defined, reified, objectified and used in the service of 'learning'. Examples of these include: Google/Wikipedia/VLEs/Web 2.0/Facebook/ YouTube/ plagiarism software, MOOCs. ANT offers important insights about the processes and objects of higher education because we are always dealing with contested practices. It helps us to see how things come together, how they are held together and what connections are created between them - in short the assembling of networks. This is particularly pertinent in the digital university where different networks, clustered around, for example, learning technologies, library services, open educational resources, learning management systems, university administration, jostle for power alongside more conventional academic networks - disciplines, for example. The very nature of the changing context of literacy in the digital university makes it somewhat different from previous manifestations of the academy- not least the ease with which with the digital circulation of texts enables powerful networks to colonise conceptions of practice and use them to promote and serve policy agendas which enact strong versions of the university. For example, the ubiquitous and authoritative use of the term 'digital literacy' signalling broad skills and competence (Goodfellow 2011; Lea 2013) – as opposed to contested social technological practice - is a consequence of the power of networks to bring things into being and to maintain them. Combining literacies research perspectives with ANT enables us to concentrate on the different networks of knowledge players and knowledge makers in the digital university, people, artefacts, technologies and processes involved in the enactment of knowledge, rather than confining our explorations to the individual practices of students and their teachers.

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