Time, space and 'real' work: researching social scientists' everyday work practices

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Research context and orientation

This paper reports on a study conceived as a contribution to understanding academic work in social science disciplinary contexts. Academic work is the subject of regular policy intervention and managerial initiatives (at least in the UK, which is the focus of the work at this stage) and yet, particularly in the social sciences, it remains one of the least-researched fields of professional practice. Whilst there is a well-established sociological literature on academic work in scientific disciplines, or 'laboratory life', there is relatively little comparable work in other disciplinary areas. Building on previous work on the construction and development of disciplinary academic identity and practice, we set out to illuminate how academic work in social science is learned, negotiated, experienced and enacted within universities and disciplinary communities; to investigate the interactions of the competing 'workplaces' of institution, department and discipline; and to explore how connections and conflicts are experienced and negotiated by academics at different career stages and in different universities.

Methodological challenges and practical solutions

This study was strongly rooted in sociomaterial analyses of work and learning (Fenwick et al, 2011), which entail tracing the relations and connections of actors (including objects/artefacts) in order to understand how these interact and negotiate to produce emergent practices and meanings. Broadly sociomaterial approaches have become increasingly common in sociological studies of work and learning, both in relation to professional practice (e.g. Hager *et al* 2012; Mäkitalo, 2012) and in more everyday contexts (e.g. Shove *et al*, 2012). However these approaches have been less evident in research on academic work, a field where the workplace, the job and the employment relationship defy straightforward definition. This project therefore had a dual purpose: to explore and develop a research methodology, and to develop new conceptual understandings of how academics practise, know and learn in disciplinary work.

The project was conducted as two case studies, each focused on the varied contexts in which social science work was practised, in two contrasting university settings. Originally these case studies were intended to be built around ethnographic observation of academic work in selected departments. However, despite initial interest in and support for the project from senior staff in the departments concerned, it proved impossible to obtain the consent of all members of the academic teams who would be studied, and without general consent, ethnographic fieldwork presented a major challenge. Whilst the refusal to participate was variously attributed to the disruption of restructuring, audits, and other (temporary) departmental problems, it rapidly became clear after repeated approaches that the resistance to being researched could not really be explained by local difficulties, but was a more systemic issue. Even among academics who themselves engaged in workplace observations of others as part of their own research, there was a distinct unwillingness to become subjects of observation. This in itself shed some interesting light on the problems of conducting ethnographic work in universities (an issue explored in some detail by Trowler, 2014), and forms the basis of a separate methodology paper.

After much deliberation, the researchers decided upon intensive work-shadowing of individual social scientists as an alternative route to obtaining a detailed picture of everyday academic work. This involved workplace observation of meetings, teaching and research activities, technological, collegial and social interactions, supplemented by visual data-gathering (e.g. photographs, artefacts, site maps). In addition, institutional documents or textual objects such as workload allocation models, minutes, prospectuses, screenshots of email in-boxes, and staff policy documents were collected. Although the work-shadowing focused on individuals, this inevitably involved observing 'bystander' colleagues and students as well (with their consent), and thus facilitated a partial ethnographic perspective on the institutional work-setting. This immersive approach also made it possible to identify the ethos, rituals and 'mantras' peculiar to each academic site, which could then be considered in the light of the story each university and/or department tried to tell about itself. Interviews were conducted with the 10 'shadowed' academics at various career stages, to explore their perceptions of their work and that of their colleagues and departments, and in

particular how the interactions of workplace actors create, and sustain or constrain, the disciplinary practices, learning and careers of academics.

Analysis and discussion

The analysis is still in progress at the time of writing, and focuses on identifying the actors and practices (social, material, technological, pedagogic, symbolic) observed in each setting, and tracing their connections and interactions – including those which extend beyond the institution with significant disciplinary networks, organisations and media. Initial findings indicate a high degree of fragmentation of disciplinary work from the activities required by the university for its organisational sustenance, and identify imaginative practices of 'working around' corporate requirements to leave space and energy for 'real' work – conceptions of which vary. Key to the illumination of disciplinary practices are the physical configuration and dispersal of academic work across 'work', 'home', 'the cloud', networks , machines and other, often fleeting, spaces and times (Gornall *et al*, 2013). Our analysis looks in particular at the organisation of intellectual, technological, social and physical space (for individuals, work-groups and departments), and the negotiation, mapping and consumption of academics' time (and that of their colleagues, students, significant others), to explore how these enable or constrain particular forms and standards of professional performance. Divergences are emerging here across gender, career stages, specialisms and subject combinations, and the scholarly status of the departments concerned. These divergences suggest further routes for fine-grained research exploration.

The final report of this project will be completed before the SRHE conference 2014, and will be made available to participants. The report will describe the analysis in detail and thus provide a fuller account of the ways in which these social science departments and practitioners negotiate the practices, purposes and meanings of disciplinary academic work within and beyond institutional boundaries. It will also evaluate the extent to which the project has fulfilled its methodological and conceptual aims.

References

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