

167 The Impact of Higher Education Reform on Professional Education

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Increasing societal demand for robust, adaptable, and pluralistic professions presents universities with new challenges in the realm of producing professional education (PE). Most professional programs share a common objective of forming a content rooted in interdisciplinary knowledge and skills. Additionally, they grant access to stable occupations within the welfare-state context, such as: engineering, nursing, teaching, and social work. Present work addresses a methodological challenge encountered in PE-research, specifically in relation to the intricate interplay of institutional and disciplinary diversity, but also to program legitimacy and quality. The paper reports on methodological insights, examining the limitations and opportunities for PE-research delving into the formation of professional knowledge bases, by especially targeting teacher education. These insights stem from a co study in a larger PhD project addressing the impact of higher education reform on professional education.

Full paper

Introduction

Increasing societal demand, coupled with a dynamic set of disciplines, institutions, and vocations, presents new challenges in the realm of producing professional education (PE) and professional knowledge within higher education (HE). Although PE-research addresses these emerging challenges, it falls short in addressing methodological issues potentially arising from the extensive and complex re-configuration within the field. This has shown to pose challenges in designing the work in an ongoing PhD study. Specifically in regards to making decisions on how to approach HE-reform aiming to reach insight on the formation of professional knowledge bases in PE, by using teacher education as an example.

Hence, this co study is a part of a larger PhD project in Educational Sciences. The project is rooted in the field of sociology, the proceedings are guided by the sociology of associations, which explores the dynamics of interconnected entities, and by the notion of actor-networks becoming durable by their expansion. Furthermore, the project embraces the principle of ontological pluralism. The aim of the co study is to explore alternative methodological approaches to reading HE-reform in research on the forming of professional knowledge bases in PE. Specifically addressing the question; what methodological limitations and opportunities is associated with applying a network approach to reading HE-reform in addressing the forming of professional knowledge bases in PE?

Research design and methodology

This co study delves into HE-reform initiatives employed to create a professional knowledge base by bringing together a specific collection of disciplinary and vocational fields. The research design is best described as ethnographic reading and writing, due to the emphasis on reflexivity (Atkinson, 2014; Davies, 2008; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). While the applied writing style bears resemblance to "reflective field notes" (Jeffrey, 2018, p. 120), it diverges in terms of the absence of a specific intention to showcase the critical voice of the ethnographer. Instead, the proceedings are designed to 'test' an approach to ethnographic writing that seeks to generate *provisional alternative formulations* of experiences, as suggested by (Latour, 2013, pp. 11-12, 64-65).

The central focus of this paper revolves around the methodological approach. The present methodology combines the reading approach targeting educational reform suggested by Fenwick (2011), together with the notion of network suggested by Latour (2013). Fenwick (2011) highlights the adequacy in revealing the interactions through which

change initiatives are mobilized, seen in early actor-network theory (ANT) research. The notion of change as an expanding network have enabled the tracing of moments of translation, revealing their gradual stabilization and durability as the network extends. But Fenwick also highlights a specific limitation in early ANT-research, which concerns the extent to which the linkages that create ambivalent belongings is addressed. In response, Fenwick propose that actors struggling to protect practices from inscription through connections – while simultaneously working the connections for their own purposes – can be understood to represent these belongings. Further demarcating by conceptualizing these linkages as spaces alongside the network, referring to the occurrence of unpredictable and undecidable direction of action. Central to these arguments is to enable alternative educational change through the unveiling of weaknesses in reform. To this end, stating the adequacy of paying close attention to the socio-material connections and their patterns.

The present methodology follows Fenwick's suggestion, but diverges from the latter statement on patterns of socio-material connections and unveiling weakness. Instead, linkages is further elaborated on by following the approach suggested by Latour (2013). This opens an opportunity to explore the moments of translation *as passing through beings* (p. 41), and to explore *as crossings* (p. 63) what Fenwick (2011, p. 131) denotes as spaces.

Teacher education as an example

The case of the knowledge base and historical development of the teaching occupation in Sweden serves as a compelling subject for research on PE, exhibiting distinct features that distinguish it from other similar occupations. Notably, the teaching occupation demonstrates a unique interplay of factors, including field consolidation and the simultaneous emergence of a scientific knowledge base in parallel with similar professions. The teaching occupation manifests three specific characteristics that warrant attention: a dynamic nature marked by frequent shifts in knowledge paradigms, a notable pursuit of professionalization both internally and externally, and a comparatively delayed stabilization as a recognized profession in relation to similar occupations (Brante et al., 2019). Consequently, the PE of the teaching occupation stands out as an apt case for the present co study, owing to its inherent disciplinary and institutional complexity, as well as the extensive body of knowledge derived from previous sociological research in the field.

References

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