Exploring sociomaterial practices and forms of resistance in early career academic teacher development: an actor-network theory perspective

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Abstract

In the current precarious landscape of UK higher education, the pathways of early career academics (ECA) to "becoming a university teacher" are opaque and contingent on various contextual factors. Relatedly, the forms of activism that are possible in response seem obscure, given the interconnectedness of the actors involved. Therefore, there is a need to understand and map this terrain and consider the nature and potential of response. This paper proposes actor-network theory as a means to explore the sociomaterial practices of university teacher training, aiming to disentangle the complex web of human and non-human (f)actors that enact academic development and illuminate the materiality of activism/resistance in academia. The suggested research design incorporates hybrid ethnographic methods and several data analysis approaches to investigate how ECAs and academic developers negotiate roles and identities in navigating their journeys and, consequently, what power relations and forms of resistance are produced with it.

Full paper

Lecturers and doctoral students (hereinafter, early career academics or ECAs) play an essential role in UK higher education provision, regularly serving as course lead instructors, seminar leaders, tutors, or graduate teaching assistants (GTA) across undergraduate and postgraduate taught educational programmes. As ECA teaching qualifications become prominent in sustaining the quality of university teaching and, therefore, their reputation and financial stability, it is crucial to understand how teacher development is enacted and how the provision of teacher training is organised within institutional settings marked by trends towards academic precarity, unrealistic professional expectations, large-scale casualisation of academic contracts (Beaton, 2017), and a broad reliance on casualised GTA labour (Muzaka, 2009; Park, 2004) for core delivery. This way, the transition to a university teaching role may be viewed as a non-linear process full of complexities and negotiations of political interests, making room for potential tensions and forms of activism and resistance. While few studies have investigated the ECAs' experiences of academic teaching and teaching support measures, to date, no studies have looked holistically at the ECA teaching competence development nor thoroughly examined the practices of academic development provision.

This paper is a work-in-progress and part of a larger continuing PhD study that explores the sociomaterial practices and core (f)actors contributing to early career academic (ECA) teacher development in the UK higher education context. The sociomaterial approach to a research enquiry and its emphasis on the relationship between social and material, human and non-human "things", bring attention to what is often excluded or overlooked – the materiality of education. By focusing on how things interact, coerce, conflict, cooperate, and come to be in an educational setting, as well as how sociomaterial practices are generated by whom or what, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity and uncertainty of educational phenomena (MacLeod & Ajjawi, 2020). In doing so, sociomateriality "enables activists [..] to make practical decisions about where it will be most effective to apply effort within a process in order to shape it" (Hamilton, 2011, p. 71).

One of the sociomaterial approaches, the actor-network theory (ANT), considers human and non-human entities as having equivalent agency in influencing each other and shaping social reality (Latour, 2005). In ANT terms, entities' characteristics, like power or aspiration, are not inherent but rather performed through ever-changing associations with other actors and networks (Muetzel, 2009). Hence, power and forms of resistance are seen as relational network effects that are generated, exercised, and negotiated only through the interactions among actors (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). Notably, unlike critical or feminist theory, ANT does not start from the assumption that power is unequally distributed (Hamilton, 2011) or held within a certain group – instead, no actors are privileged a priori. This, in turn, potentially brings new perspectives on how activism may be practically enacted.

This paper takes a sociomaterial approach to ECA teacher development and looks at the experiences of both ECAs in engaging in teacher training and academic developers in enabling it. These experiences may highlight potential institutional barriers, tensions, and debates and allow a better understanding of the constitutive heterogeneous elements and flow of power exerted by and on actors involved in teacher development. For example, if the study captures instances where ECAs or academic developers engage in advocacy or collective action to address challenges in their training or professional practice, the ANT perspective will be able to show how those individuals and groups join those networks, what holds them together, how the collective roles are demarcated, or how power relations are distributed in the network.

This continuing study employs a longitudinal multi-site ethnography to capture the academic development practices in two distinct types of universities – a traditional and a post-1992 university. The ethnomethodology implies (1) a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with early career academics, namely, doctoral students and recently appointed lecturers involved in teaching; (2) diaries and photovoice activities; (3) observations of participant interaction on virtual communication platforms; and (4) document analysis of teacher training materials on learning management systems – all investigated with a combination of content, thematic, and social network analyses. While acknowledging the research limitations in terms of scope and preliminary nature of findings, the result of data collection and analysis will be represented as an aggregated map of core actors, associations, and formed networks that not only (re)creates but also allows (re)imagining teacher development in the UK academia while answering the question, "What do we practically mean when someone is involved in a form of activism in higher education?"

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