294

Mapping Sociomaterial Practices and (f)Actors Contributing to Early Career Academic Teaching Development

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper explores how UK early career academics (ECAs) develop their teaching practice, drawing on the lived experiences of ECAs and professional practices of academic developers. While UK university teaching relies heavily on novice lecturers, they often face multiple and increasing pressures from the neoliberal academy, challenging early teaching experiences, a lack of preparation or training, and inadequate workloads. This study adopts a sociomaterial perspective of Actor-Network Theory to trace how interactions of human and non-human (f)actors shape the development of ECA practice. Using longitudinal ethnographic methods targeting four ECAs and four academic developers across two institutions and employing Visual Network Analysis to illuminate everyday academic and professional practices, this research highlights particular sociomaterial networks that contribute to or impede ECA teaching development. This paper argues for more comprehensive and inclusive practices and institutional policies to support ECA development, contributing to more collegial, caring, and supportive academic communities.

Full paper

Introduction

“Early career academic” typically refers to UK post-PhD roles like lecturers, who usually carry the heavy load of undergraduate and postgraduate delivery. Their teaching practice often concurs with multiple and increasing pressures of the contemporary neoliberal academy (Tight, 2019), where ECAs are expected to “shine on all fronts of the profession” (Heijstra et al., 2017, p. 770) while working beyond their contractual hours (UCU, 2022) and “constantly find[ing] themselves working against time” (Rowell & Morris, 2023, p. 39). It is also not uncommon for novice ECAs to teach with limited or no formative teaching preparation (Harland, 2020) and even outside their expertise (Mathieson et al., 2024). This, naturally, leaves little room for teaching upskilling or investment in meaningful pedagogical development (Leathwood & Read, 2022).

While universities offer academic development programmes or professional recognition schemes (Advance HE, 2023), most of the ECA learning-to-teach happens on the job (Harland, 2020), often making these initiatives disconnected from the lived realities of ECAs (Mathieson et al., 2024). Recent studies tend to evaluate teacher training provision or explore ECA first teaching experiences (Crutchley et al., 2021) separately. They use limited theoretical perspectives to better understand how ECA teaching development looks in practice, ignoring the sociomaterial conditions in which ECAs operate or contextual (f)actors they regularly interact with, such as tools, technologies, spaces, texts, or objects.

This study presents a novel, more-than-human perspective on ECA teaching development that considers both ECAs' lived experiences and academic developers' professional practices to explore the following research questions:

- **RQ1.** How is the teaching development of ECAs experienced and practised?
- **RQ2.** What sociomaterial (f)actors contribute to the teaching development of UK-based ECAs, how are those interrelated, and what effects do they produce?

Theory

This study employs Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to examine those sociomaterial practices that are involved in ECA teaching development, focusing on the interactions between human (social) and non-human (material) actors. Analysing "practice" as the primary unit (Moura & Bispo, 2020), sociomateriality sheds light on the less visible material aspects of education, offering a deeper insight into the messy and multifaceted nature of educational practices (MacLeod & Ajjawi, 2020). According to ANT, human and non-human *actors* are equivalent (or symmetrical) in their capacity to exert agency (Latour, 2005). Therefore, educational practices are seen as fluid and contingent *actor-networks* that come into being through *translation* (Callon, 1986) and create relational *network effects* such as knowledge, identity, power, development, and experience (Law & Hassard, 1999). ANT provides a comprehensive framework and methodological toolbox for tracing how dynamic networks of heterogeneous actors translate (or not) into ECA teaching development.

Methodology

A longitudinal ethnographic methodology (Fenwick, 2010) was adopted to "follow the actors themselves" (Latour, 2005, p. 12) and trace how the existing sociomaterial practices of academic development and teaching work - materialising both in physical and virtual spaces - translate into ECA development (or not). The data collection spanned one academic year across two distinct UK universities and implied various ethnographic qualitative research methods: participant mapping interviews, diaries, observations, and

photovoice. The sample included four ECA participants (N1=4) enrolled in academic development programmes and four academic developers (N2=4).

ECAs logged diary entries related to significant moments in their learning-to-teach journey, sharing insights through text, imagery, and audio/video recordings. During the semi-structured mapping interviews, ECA participants developed individual mind maps with people and things they interacted with that informed their teaching practice. Simultaneously, academic developers engaged in photovoice - a photo-elicitation technique to capture their professional practice's materiality. During mapping interviews, academic developers developed individual mind maps based on their beliefs regarding the sociomaterial (f)actors contributing to ECA teaching development. Finally, classroom observations of participant interactions complemented the interviews and diaries, assisting in triangulating the generated data.

For this continuing PhD research, all data will be analysed and represented with visual network analysis (Decuypere, 2020). The multiplicity of research methods is expected to elicit rich descriptions and connect detailed networked data across geographical spaces and times, offering a more nuanced and holistic perspective of "experiencing" and "practising" teaching development.

Expected outcomes

The expected findings are likely to reveal new insights into how UK ECAs learn to teach, showcasing that teaching development is a non-linear, messy, highly networked, and materially embedded process, where the serendipity of ECAs' learning, academic developers' role-modelling, the value of discipline-specific research-led teaching, (in)formal peer interactions, collegial support, and use of digital tools is inseparable.

Ultimately, this work aspires to advance theoretical understanding and practical strategies for supporting ECAs, ensuring their development and upskilling are better integrated and valued in academic communities.