

Not here, not now: reconstructing academic work from a distance

This paper considers the methodological aspects of a current study which attempts to combine a sociomaterial sensibility with methods borrowed from oral history and visual sociology, as a way of researching academic work in contemporary and recent-historical contexts. This approach was stimulated by interest in exploring the value of a sociomaterial perspective (Fenwick et al, 2011) in understanding how contemporary academic work is negotiated, experienced and enacted both within universities and within disciplinary communities, by academics and by other actors. This work has been strongly influenced by the emergence of 'work and learning' as a research field, and in particular by studies which draw upon actor-network theory broadly conceived (e.g. Nespor, 1994; Mulcahy, 2011; Viteretti, 2012). One of the challenging aspects of ANT is its perspective of 'relational symmetry', whereby human beings and objects (physical, digital, textual, etc.) are accorded the same status as 'actors' in any given situation; thus it has given rise to studies of, for example, laboratories, diseases, technological innovations, etc. in which particular configurations of actors and networks of relationships enact and create specific realities.

Researching from the standpoint of this sociomaterialist 'sensibility' entails tracing the relations and connections of actors (including objects and artefacts) – or 'material assemblages', in order to understand how these interact and negotiate to produce emergent practices and meanings. Academics simultaneously inhabit the university and the discipline as places of work; so one immediate problem for the researcher is in identifying the boundaries around the academic workplace(s). And despite the prevalence of workplace and educational ethnographies, the daily enactments of academic work in terms of spatial, temporal, departmental and disciplinary practices (except perhaps in certain scientific disciplines) have been far less subject to close-grained study.

The ongoing project which forms the basis of this paper sets out to investigate the everyday practices of academic work in selected social science disciplines, focusing on the ways in which the complex relationships between the discipline and the university are enacted in the everyday practices of academic work, and how those practices and relationships vary over time, discipline and institutional setting. The study has two distinct strands, contemporary and recent-historical. Individual academics are not the direct *subjects* of the research, in that I am not seeking to trace the trajectory or life-history of individuals. Rather they offer a way in, through 'the ordinary doings and language that are the stuff of people's lives', to a 'terrain of a sociological discourse, the business of which is to examine *how that stuff is hooked into a larger fabric* not directly observable from within the everyday' (Smith, 2005: 39) – a terrain on which it becomes possible to trace the complex interaction of disciplinary and institutional networks in producing academic work. For the study of *contemporary* academic work it is quite feasible to make use of face-to-face and email interviews, diaries, workplace observation, visual narrative and analysis of institutional and disciplinary documents/textual objects – methods that have been used in various other studies of work drawing on sociomaterialist perspectives. But the *recent-historical* strand of the project – where the question of variation over time is explored – presented different methodological challenges. Although documentary material and archives from the period in question (1965 – 83) are easily available, there are few contemporary detailed qualitative studies of the experience of academic work – and those that do exist are very much products of the intellectual (more specifically sociological) history of the time (e.g. Halsey and Trow, 1971). Tracing *materiality* in the enactment of social processes from a distance in time is a difficult task.

I therefore utilised approaches from oral history and visual sociology to gather data on the experience of academics in post during some or all of this period. Although such methods are quite common in sociological studies of work and employment, they constitute a novel approach in research on academic work (in which neither the workplace nor the employment relationship is easily defined). This involved face-to-face interviews combined with the use of modified lifegrids (e.g. Ashwin et al, 2010); it also entailed asking participants to provide me with access to historical visual material, correspondence, personal archives and artefacts. These materials informed some of the discussion in the interviews, but images (usually photographs) or copies of them were also collected and analysed as part of the research data.

In this symposium I present selected data and analyses generated by this historical project strand to illustrate how the methodological choices arising from my chosen theoretical perspective have played out in the practice of conducting the research, and to what extent they have enabled me to trace and interpret the material and social entanglements of academic work from a distance in time and space. Having mobilised ANT as 'a gadget that might do a job' (Law, 2011), can the gadget be said to have worked?

References

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