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Higher Education in Further Education in England: An Actor-Network Ethnography

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ABSTRACT

The provision of higher education courses within further education colleges in England poses particular questions for the researcher. This article argues that the complexities of the relationships between colleges where courses are run, and the universities that supply these courses, can be fruitfully explored using actor-network theory. This article provides an actor-network account of one teacher-training course as an example of the ways in which both people and text-based artefacts are coalesced and coordinated so that the course functions across institutional and spatial boundaries. Assessment has been chosen as a specific focus several reasons: it must be performed in certain ways and must conform to particular outcomes that are standardised across colleges; it is an established focus of research; and it is a focus of specific observable activities. The article concludes that assessment processes are regulated and ordered in complex ways for which actor-network theory provides an appropriate conceptual framework. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Assessment; Education Research; Higher Education; Teacher Education

INTRODUCTION

This article argues that Higher Education in Further Education provision in England can fruitfully be explored using the theoretical insights offered by actor-network theory. Focussing on assessment systems on one teacher-training course for the learning and skills sector, the article offers ways of conceptualising the responses of Further Education colleges that run the course to the systems and procedures established by the university which provides the course on a franchise basis. Drawing on data that has been collected over a three year period, the article suggests that the ways in which assessment systems are regulated and ordered are characterised by complexities for which actor-network theory provides an appropriate conceptual framework.
The data presented here is drawn from a larger data set collected during the period 2005 to 2007 as part of a PhD funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Interview data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with both tutors and students on the course, and the narratives produced have been conceptualised both as a form of retrospective meaning making, and also as a form of presentation of the narrator’s (that is to say, the interviewee’s) point of view (Chase, 2005; Silverman, 2005). Other data was collected through documentary analysis of a range of sources including course handbooks, module specifications, internal moderation reports and external examiners’ reports (Rapley, 2007; Tight, 2003). All data has been rendered anonymous through the use of pseudonyms and the disguise of other signifiers such as locations, module titles and the exact names of management groups or committees (Christians, 2005).

**HIGHER EDUCATION IN FURTHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY**

Millfield University is a university in the north of England with a history of training teachers for the learning and skills sector that stretches back forty years. For a long time, the university has delivered its teacher-training courses on a collaborative basis with a large number of Further Education (FE) colleges. FE colleges predominantly cater for students aged 16-19 who are following technical or vocational programmes of study. On completion of their courses, most students will enter employment although some will progress to university. FE colleges offer a range of programmes for adults, some of whom may be returning to learning after a protracted period out of formal education and training and some of whom may be returning to college to update or refresh existing skills. FE colleges also deliver courses in literacy and numeracy to adults. And, increasingly, FE colleges provide a venue for Higher Education (HE) courses, invariably on a part-time basis. This provision of higher education courses within further education institutions is generally referred to as *HE in FE* provision, and can be seen as one of a number of methods through which wider participation in HE more generally can be offered (Parry et al., 2003; Parry and Thompson, 2002; Thomas, 2001).

The scale of Millfield University’s teacher-training provision has expanded considerably since 1992. At each college there is a designated course leader who both teaches on and locally manages the programme; in addition, there are other course tutors. The course is available as a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) to graduates, or as a certificate in education (Cert Ed) to non-graduates, who are teaching either part-time or full-time in post-compulsory education. These teaching contexts include further education colleges (the majority of students on the course), accredited adult education, and higher education. The course is endorsed by both Lifelong Learning UK (the body responsible for professional standards in teaching in the further education sector in England and Wales) and the Higher Education Academy (the equivalent body for the higher education sector). It takes two years to complete on a part-time in-service basis. A little over half of all of the students on the course take the Cert Ed route. That is to say, for these students this teacher train-
ing course represents a first experience of higher education.

From Audit to Actor-Networks

The ubiquitous demands of quality assurance, as they might relate to any HE programme, raise particular concerns when considering the systems involved in HE in FE provision. Quality assurance (QA) is understood here as consisting of those processes that can be seen as ensuring the quality and fitness for purpose of the HE programme under discussion. Benchmarking, external verification, audit and evaluation: these are the ways in which the work of an HE in FE network tends to be evaluated, for the purposes of quality assurance, within a managerialist culture (Avis, 2005; Barnett, 2003; Gleeson et. al., 2005). Quality assurance and audit processes need to satisfy relevant interested parties that HE provision, as it is delivered in an FE context, has a sufficient level of equivalence to what might be found within a university, to be considered of appropriate rigour and quality. This might be in terms of resources, of learning and teaching processes (which will include assessment, the focus of this article), even of the quality of accommodation (Hilborne, 1996). The tools by which the demands of audit are satisfied include people, including tutors and managerial professionals; processes, such as inspections and audit; and outputs, such as inspection reports, all of which are commonly found within audit cultures (Shore and Wright, 1999; Shore and Wright, 2000).

Amongst the different practices that are carried out within this teacher-training network, assessment provides particular opportunities for researching such systems. Firstly, assessment is such a central aspect of the work of this Higher Education in Further Education (HE in FE) network, that it provides a wealth of material for the researcher: all participants do it, both students and tutors, and there is a considerable amount of documentation of various kinds relating to it, such as course handbooks and external examiners’ reports. Secondly, assessment practice is in and of itself, a focus of research and scholarship, not least relating to both the role of assessment as preparing people for a professional role (Atkins, 1995; Katz, 2000; Taylor, 1997), but also in terms of the assessment methodology used on teacher training courses (Klenowski, 2002; Tigelaar, 2005; Young, 1999). Thirdly, and drawing on the two previous themes, assessment can be conceptualised as a nexus of practice (Scollon, 2001): that is to say, it is a place where a number of strands—pedagogy, policy, audit—conflate.

The assessment process within this teacher training course is subject to considerable managerialist scrutiny: internally, through assessment moderation and course committees; and externally through external examination, inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), and accreditation by Standards Verification UK (the body that endorses all teacher training qualifications for the learning and skills sector). These and other activities and procedures are all geared towards making sure that the assessment process is carried out correctly, from a quality assurance perspective.

QA systems such as this are complex. Internal moderation provides a good example. Over the course of a single academic year, internal moderation, within this teacher-training network, consists of two day-long meetings in twelve different locations, with all of the tutors on the programme poring over a total of 200 different student
portfolios. Tutors talk with each other, discuss the work that they are reading, occasionally argue over the interpretation of learning outcomes, or whether a student’s work is of an acceptable standard. However, by the time of the writing of the internal moderation report, as required by the QA systems of the franchising university, all of these processes are distilled within a report which summarises, and thereby simplifies, the process. Audit culture values unambiguity and simplicity. All the complexity and ambiguity of the internal moderation process is absent (Law, 2004).

So, how to restore this complexity and detail to an investigation of not just moderation, but assessment systems as a whole? How is assessment done? How does a geographically distant university manage to make things to do with assessment happen in different places, at different times, and with different people involved? Somehow, the University manages to get lots of different people to do different things relating to the course at different times: how can these relationships be explored and theorised, without over-simplification? How can the complexity, the ambiguity, the mess, be brought back? Or, to turn the question around, how might the ordering of the social project of assessment across the network of colleges be explored in such a way that its complexities can be maintained, rather than lost? A suggested framework through which to approach these questions is provided by actor-network theory (ANT) (Barton and Hamilton, 2005; Clarke, 2002; Edwards 2003; Fox, 2000, 2005; Latour, 2005; Law, 1994; Law 2004).

Perhaps appropriately, bearing in mind its antecedents in post-structuralism, ANT defies a simple definition. It comes in several varieties. Having said this, extant literature allows a few themes to be teased out. Firstly, ANT is a sociology of association (Latour, 2005), or of ramifying relations (Law, 2004): it is a way of thinking about how social projects are joined together (in ways which can be traced) using networks of associations or links. Secondly, ANT provides ways of thinking about how associations influence each other, and the ways in which people are made to do things across networks of geography or time or institutional boundaries: “how to make someone do something” is a central concern (Latour, 2005: 59). Thirdly, ANT goes on to explore the ways in which people are made to do things through analysing the technologies which are used to achieve this: both people and objects can make people do something; that is to say, both people and objects are granted agency within ANT. Objects can travel across networks, and can carry meaning and intention. Many such objects are text-based (Barton and Hamilton, 2005; Law, 1994). They are referred to as immutable mobiles: they are stable in form, but are transportable (Latour, 2005). Finally, ANT moves attention away from the role of amorphous social forces such as ‘culture’ or ‘society’, employing an anti-reductionist commitment to complexity, whilst foregrounding the practical means by which social ties are kept in place (Clarke, 2002; Law, 2004). So how might ANT contribute to an exploration of the ordering work (Law, 1994) that goes into the assessment process across our network of colleges?

ANT provides a way to investigate the strategies, activities and resources that are used by the university to reify, distribute, monitor and standardise (that is to say, to order) the assessment process across the network. The assessment process has both a pedagogic aspect and a managerial aspect, and these are linked. In terms of pedagogy,
it is the process of the actual act of assessment, and hence the validity, reliability and sufficiency of the process, that is of importance. In terms of management, it is the processes of moderation and standardisation of assessment procedure that are of importance. The artefacts that accompany these processes are all either text-based (course handbooks and module packs, feedback pro-formas and internal moderation schedules created by the university and delivered to the colleges) or involve talk around text (moderation meetings involve talk around a range of texts: assignments; report forms; internal moderation feedback forms). But people are necessarily involved as well: there are monthly meetings for tutors; twice-yearly internal moderation events; twice-yearly meetings that see a member of the university’s staff going out to one of the colleges within the network. And, of course, it is important to remember that all of the text-based artefacts, or immutable mobiles already referred to, are written by people.

What ANT provides, in sum, is a framework that allows a detailed account of the actual ways by which the social project of assessment is ordered, through exploring the movement of both people and artefacts, how successful their movement is, how they are read or acted on or responded to when they arrive at their destination, and how, why and when what they say might be unwittingly misinterpreted or wilfully deviated from. With ANT, we can follow a chain of activities, actors and artefacts in order to explore the ways by which the university gets assessment done in the colleges.

Getting the Assignments Out There:

Texts as Immutable Mobiles

The story begins with an assignment brief, or seven briefs to be precise: there are seven modules in the course. A different account might concern itself with how that assignment brief actually got written in the first place in the way it has been written, by whom, and why. Here, the focus in on the assignment brief from just one module as it travels from the university, to the desk of a CertEd or PGCE student in a classroom in a further education college, some months later and many miles away. The module in question is the first one that the students will study. There are two important immutable mobiles to consider here: the course handbook and the module pack.

The course handbook is a 96 page A4 document. As well as containing module specifications for the whole course, it also includes a wealth of other information, such as guidance on Harvard referencing; an introduction to reflective practice; and more general information such as deadlines, plagiarism warnings, and the like. The module pack is much smaller: only a dozen pages or so. There is a pack for each module, containing: the module specifications and assignment brief; a module cover sheet for use when students submit their work; and a blank feedback pro-forma for use by tutors. The module specifications include: learning outcomes; indicative reading; outline syllabuses; and assessment details. They constitute written instructions for assessment, to be delivered to the colleges. In sum, the course handbook and module pack constitute two text-based immutable mobiles that are used to synchronise or order the work of (amongst other things to do with the course) the assessment pro-
cess. Reading lists and syllabuses privilege some texts, authors and perspectives over others, and assessments privilege some forms of academic writing or genre, such as essayist literacy or reflective writing, over others (Lillis, 2001; Swales, 1990; Tummons, 2008). A calendar dictates the timing of particular activities such as the submission of assessed work or the internal moderation process, to synchronise the work done in the network of colleges, in order to coincide with university deadlines (Crook et al., 2006). In short, the university owns the assessment process, and the other partners in the network conform to these processes.

Before the module arrives at a college (and it might be emailed as an attachment, downloaded from the internet or posted in hard copy format), the reification of the module specifications constitute a moment where power can be seen at work. Richard is the teacher-training course leader at the university and co-leader of the module in question:

**Question:** …imagining either the course handbook or the module pack in front of us with the, what I think I’m right in saying is not the full module specification but a significant chunk of it that the students actually see, is that correct?

**Richard:** yeah, the way it is at the moment is probably 75% of the [board of studies] version of the module spec […] We do miss out a few more important things like, for example, there’s a specification of the expected hours and I think it’s pretty obvious why we don’t put that in what we give to the students.

**Question:** Do you think that at [board of studies] everyone knows it doesn’t quite happen, I don’t know, it’s almost like a game or…

**Richard:** No, no, let me clarify that a little bit. The tutor led hours here we do stay quite scrupulously to

**Question:** independent study and assessment for example

**Richard:** yeah that will obviously vary from student to student. I mean we would take a dim view if [colleges] departed significantly from 48 hours for a 20 credit module but one of the reasons we don’t put in the module spec is if for some reason you’re only able to deliver 46 hours, or you might decide you want an extra couple of hours, and you don’t want the students saying “it says in this module specification forty-eight”.

It is perhaps superfluous to note that the handbooks or packs that will be read by students on the course will have been written or designed or shaped for them, not with them. But these are also the versions of the module specifications that will be read by tutors at the colleges. Some knowledge, in this one example relating to guided learning hours and independent study hours, is kept at the university, which has the power to do so because it creates the procedures, and the artefacts which reify them. That is to say, it has the power to shape conversations within the colleges, about the construction of the course. In this small example, the number of guided learning hours and private study hours (or, rather, the lack of a specific number) constitutes an example of the uneven distribution of power between university and colleges.

The course handbook, and all the module packs, are distributed electronically. Each college receives electronic versions either via email or by downloading them from the university’s virtual learning envi-
ronment: it is up to each college to reproduce and distribute them for the students. How people in the colleges respond to them is another matter. Emma is a college-based tutor with a background in literacy teaching, now in her second year of teaching the PCET course:

Emma: the graphology isn’t good [...] well, erm, we’re looking at the visual aspect of it now. Font size, font style, no white space. This is all things that do not support literacy. And I think that supporting literacy isn’t just about teaching somebody how to put full stops in. It’s actually about supporting the whole reading, and if you make reading accessible, then that is what is necessary.

Question: [...] do you think this is something that is noticed by your own students?

Emma: they don’t, they’ve all said they look at these and they don’t like them, they don’t like reading them. and I also think that they are rather confusing because they have the assessment there on one page, then they have the assessment on another page. Which bit is the student supposed to refer to, which bit is the tutor supposed to refer to? It’s cluttered. And clutter does not make for good reading, and it doesn’t invite anybody to read and one of the principles that I, that we look at on the literacy courses, level 3 level 4, is reorganising information. It’s critical.

Emma’s critique of the material form of the module pack rests on her own professional knowledge, experience and identity as a basic skills tutor. So can anything be done to ameliorate this problem? After all, since colleges are responsible for the reproduction of these module packs as well as the course handbooks which are delivered in electronic form, it would be a straightforward task to, for example, enlarge the font size as an aid to legibility. I spoke to the course leaders at six of the colleges within the network about the reproduction of course documents: of these, four reproduced the documents exactly as they received them; the other two introduced a small innovation by using coloured paper. According to the course leader at the university, colleges are free to adapt or add to the module packs because they are not auditable documents. Few of the college-based tutors are aware of this adaptability, however.

Once in circulation, the packs and handbooks settle down, as do the students and tutors, to the task at hand: that is, the business of the course: of reading, of the module outcomes, of the assessment strategies for the module. And both tutors and students should know what to do: it’s in the paperwork, after all. Working out exactly what is required sometimes needs some effort, however, as demonstrated by the tutors and students quoted above. They might not necessarily like them, but they have to use them. To that end, tutors engage in a range of exercises designed to introduce students to what needs to be done. They prepare powerpoint presentations; additional handouts; close-reading exercises; writing frames. These are done at a local level: different tutors do different things in different colleges. But the effort is uniform insofar as these different actions are all aimed at the successful interpretation and negotiation of the assignment brief.

It may not be a surprise to learn that a majority of students do not always read large documents such as the course handbook from cover to cover: they rely on their tutor to tell them what sections to read,
what they need to know. Nor may it come as a surprise to learn that a majority of tutors do not read large documents such as the course handbook from cover to cover, either: as well as dipping in and out of it, they can and do rely on other resources: people, conversations, meetings, internal moderation events, university web sites, perhaps their own memories of being students on the same course. In different ways, such activities as these help to fix, to render less slippery, the key messages that the university wants to send out regarding how assessment should be done. The texts are being used, but not in isolation. They need to be sponsored and responded to by people (Brandt and Clinton, 2002).

If social action is, in part, done by things as well as by people, then the action in question can be transported further than might otherwise be the case (Latour, 2005). Packs and handbooks are a practical, and relatively cheap, way for the university to get the assessment process ‘out there’. But ANT “is not the empty claim that objects do things ‘instead’ of human actors”; rather, things might “authorise, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on” (ibid: 72). Assignment briefs do indeed make students and tutors go about the process of assessment in certain ways. And they work that way, in part, because that is what they were written to do. At the same time, the university knows, in part, that its instructions about assessment are getting across because it knows that the correct paperwork is being used. But it also knows that there is more to it than this. The university can trust colleges to use learning and teaching strategies of their own design to explicate the assessment process, but only to support what it has provided. And anyway, it would be highly impractical to monitor physically all of what goes on in the different colleges. So the university needs to do more than just provide text-based artefacts to keep the system moving. Other actors are needed as well, and these need to be people.

**Tracing Associations: People and Places, not Just Things**

Immutable mobiles work the way that they are supposed to because people, as well as things, are involved with them, in getting things done in certain ways, in the work of ordering assessment as a social project. People not only write and interpret them, but they accompany them, sponsor them, champion them, remind others of their importance. And this is where the issue of trust, raised above, comes to the fore.

The university cannot or will not leave the tutors in the colleges to get on with using these handbooks, or artefacts, or immutable mobiles, on their own: they need to be accompanied.

There are several ways to accomplish this. To begin with, it is necessarily to acculturate tutors in colleges: all new tutors on the course attend a “development day” at the University, run by an experienced member of academic staff who teaches on the course and has responsibility for quality assurance. There are monthly meetings, when representatives from the course delivery teams at the colleges come to the university. Invariably, these meetings cover both bureaucratic issues (such as admissions policy, which, like assessment, is ordered by the university but carried out in the colleges themselves), and academic issues (such as the introduction of e-learning, curriculum development, and occasional scholarly presentations by internal and external speakers). And the university comes...
to the colleges as well. Twice a year, each college will hold a course meeting, where a member of the university department will attend in a liaison tutor capacity. These meetings are minuted, and a copy of the minutes must go back to the university. The internal moderation events are hosted by colleges on a rota basis, grouped into geographically convenient batches of six; again, a member of the university attends, this time in a chief internal moderator role. The chief internal moderator at each event writes a report, using a pro-forma, and these are combined to create a single internal moderation report, as described earlier in this paper. Once every three years, a panel of university staff visit each college in order to revalidate formally the PCET course provision. It perhaps goes without saying that this visit is preceded by the creation of a significant text artefact by the college in question which is submitted to the university before the visit. There are two annual conferences (also open to external delegates) and a host of other training events for non-teaching staff. In sum, there is a significant number of ways by which interested people accompany or travel alongside the artefacts of the network. Or, to put it another way, there are many different kinds of social actions by which actors, which can be people or things, across a number of sites, can coordinate activity. And many of these activities involve people, and texts, and talk around these texts. What is important, in ANT, is the fact that both people and non-people are involved in establishing action (Latour, 2005: 75).

Bringing the Assessments Home: Returning to Internal Moderation

Both people and artefacts are involved in sending the assessments ‘out there’ into the network. The assessment process becomes relatively difficult to trace once the tutors and students are actually working on them until the assessments are actually done, marked, and given written feedback. This is done according to university procedures that are inscribed within the module packs and course handbooks, and which tutors have been exposed to as part of their professional development. The audit trail can be picked up at this point. Once students’ work has been completed, a sample of this work goes to internal moderation.

As already mentioned, the processes of internal moderation have to be organised across significant physical and temporal boundaries. As such, the university has created a series of written documents that carry the rules and regulations surrounding the process to the different colleges where the course is delivered. These rules govern details such as the timing of internal examination, the amount of work to be sampled and the location for the meetings. In this way, a uniformity can be applied to the process. The course leader at each college is responsible for selecting a sample of student work. As well as bringing along all assignments that are marked as having failed, course leaders select at their own discretion a representative sample of work, some excellent, some borderline. The size of the sample is set at 5%. Colleges are divided into groups (of about five or six) that come to regional meetings where work is distributed and moderated. Normally each assignment is read by one other tutor. A brief feedback sheet is completed for each moderated file. A representative from Millfield University also attends these meetings, and takes a chief moderator role, with any disputes referred to them, although the internal moderation meeting does not have the power to reverse an assessment
decision. Each region holds a moderation meeting twice a year. At the end of the meeting, an internal moderation report is completed. Eventually, a single internal moderation report, effectively a compilation of the dozen or so produced during the two rounds of regional meetings, is produced at the university.

If the number of people, places and written documents for the process as a whole were agglomerated, the tally would be considerable: over 400 assignments, each with an internal moderation sheet attached, and a dozen regional internal moderation reports, all completed during 12 day-long meetings in six different locations and involving over 100 tutors; one overall internal moderation report, written by the course examinations tutor at the university; five or six external examiners’ reports, written after a two-day external examiners’ meeting at the university; one overall chief external examiner’s report. This last report is the final product of the process: four or five sides of A4 paper.

But the problem of over-simplification remains. Such detailed processes speak of accountability and transparency, but they lack the fine-grained detail that an actor-network account would provide. If the actor-network relies on the cooperation and engagement of all of the actors within the network, then an actor-network account would also insist on a scrupulous examination of how and why these actors work the way that they do, thereby restoring the richness and complexity to the story of (in this example) internal moderation, that the audit trail silences.

As already mentioned, the 5% representative sample of student work that goes to internal moderation is selected by the course leaders at the colleges. But this selection process is far from straightforward. In fact, it is a locus for considerable professional doubt and scrutiny:

**Debbie (course leader, Nunthorpe College):** …we only take five per cent, we select [the assignments] ourselves. Now although we’re encouraged to select the borderline, the middle of the road and the high flyers, you have to be quite brave to take along the borderline ones, and I, I’ve tried to be brave sometimes and taken [borderline] ones, and then we get into academic discussions about whether it was good enough or not. But I’m being brave because I’m opening myself up to why I passed them, when I might be having an internal debate as to whether I should have passed them or not, and what the cut off point is between not quite good enough, and good enough. I think we should have more debates about this, perhaps. […]

**Question:** and do you think we should take more than five per cent to the moderation event?

**Debbie:** it’s the sheer practicalities of getting through the amount of work. Is it better to look at the work and take our time and do a thorough read through? I’m very slow at reading, other people are very quick. I could take a cursory look but that’s not, may not be good enough. So five per cent is probably okay but what I do wonder about, and this is really contentious, is whether we should be given some names of who we should take, because it depends on how I’m feeling, as to whether I think “let me just take some standard, you know, some good work. If we’ve got some excellent work I’ll take that along.” I know no-ones going to quibble with me about the level but if there are
some who are on the borderline, I may think not. “No, I won’t take that piece of work.”

CONCLUSION:
ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY
AND THE ORDERING OF ASSESSMENT

Accounts of other actor-networks have taken time to expound the conceptual tools of ANT in more or less greater amounts of detail (Clarke, 2002; Edwards, 2003; Fox, 2000; Fox, 2005; Hamilton, 2001). Briefly, a network can grow like this: first, one group of actors identify a problem or activity or thing that needs to be done; a project that needs to be ordered. Crucially, this group has a monopoly on the means by which the problem can be solved, or the thing can get done: other actors have to follow their orders and employ the same means. Secondly, it is necessary to gain the commitment of these others to the course of action needed, as defined by the first group. Next, the others need to be persuaded, or induced, or threatened into enrolling into the course of action that the initial group of actors have proposed. And so, finally, these others have been mobilised. The actors have translated the interests of the others into their own, reduced them to a representative sample so that they can communicate with them, using both voices and texts.

Therefore, this actor-network can be seen as being an actor-network in several ways. Firstly, there is a social project to be ordered: the project of assessment. The desirability and importance of the project is not questioned or challenged in any sense thanks to the emergence of broadly shared practices on assessment on part-time courses for professionals which are run on an HE in FE basis (Brown, 1999a; Brown, 1999b; Taylor 1997; Young 1999). Secondly, the university manages to gain the commitment and then cooperation of other actors within the network. This is achieved through a number of means. To some extent the college-based actors are self-selecting: tutors have often chosen to work as teacher educators, or have been encouraged to do so (Noel, 2006). To some extent the historical background of the network serves to normalise the processes of commitment and cooperation: the vast majority of colleges within the network have been in the network for fifteen years, and some have been working with Millfield University for much longer. For colleges as institutions, the capital, both financial and political, generated by HE in FE provision is a powerful incentive for participation and cooperation. Moreover, the dominant discourses of quality assurance have created a culture within FE that is receptive to the audit demands of HE in FE provision (Parry and Thompson 2002; Parry et. al., 2003). Finally, the university is able to mobilise the actors within this network. By this I mean that tutors, students and colleges are made to do things: to explain assessment briefs; to mark assessments; to take a sample of assessments to internal moderation. Firstly, this is achieved through the mobilisation of a variety of immutable mobiles, text-based objects that carry instructions ranging from which books should be read, to how feedback should be written, to when the results of assessment need to be returned to the university. These objects also perpetuate and reinforce the practices of the network: meetings, whether for bureaucratic or for moderation purposes, are captured in text-based artefacts so that those things that happen in them, that are important for the
work of the actor-network, can be perpetuated, although it is important to remember that such reifications can lead to a loss of complexity (Wenger, 1998). Secondly, mobilisation is achieved through people: internal moderators, liaison tutors, all the other people in the big monthly meetings who tell the college-based tutors what is coming next, or what procedures are now due, or what the new look syllabus might be like.

Ordering the social project of assessment is a technologically complex task, therefore, consisting of a chain made up of links that are both human and non-human. The actions taken by all of these different actors are many, varied and complex. They are circumscribed by the other actors within the network as a whole, some of whom are more powerful and influential than others. But all of the actors’ accounts matter, and need to be listened to. Debbie’s narrative highlights the complex and ambiguous decisions that surround the selection of assignments to take to moderation, a process that is far from straightforward—although audit discourses might say otherwise. What might be termed Debbie’s professional ambiguity in no way mitigates against her broader professional expertise and ethical approach: yet the process is clearly a fraught one. Emma’s narrative shows a different, but no less important, example of professional expertise at work: here, a professional judgement about the legibility, the usability, and perhaps the worth of the kind of documentation that a network of this size relies on. For Emma, the professional challenge is in interpreting this document (and others) so that her students can access them. Finally, there is Richard’s narrative, embodying the perspective of the university at the centre which has the ability, the power, to shape and influence the work that is being done throughout the network as a whole to order the process of assessment. Some of this shaping is done by people, and some is done by artefacts, predominantly literacy artefacts. Both the people and the artefacts, or to put it another way, the human actors and the non-human actors, make things happen. The things that happen, and the ambiguities that surround them, are not privileged by audit discourses. But their traces—Debbie’s hard choices over moderation, Emma’s profound reservations about the course documentation, Richard’s ability to shape how the course is done,—are abundant, within an actor-network.

So, I have chosen to trace an ‘assessment’ actor-network, and some of the ways in which this actor-network orders things have been unearthed. Some parts of this ‘assessment’ network might take us in a number of complicated and perhaps confusing directions: we could choose to follow ‘external examination’ instead of ‘internal moderation’ and thereby encounter the work done by some different actors and artefacts, across multiple sites and at multiple times. What an ANT approach offers, therefore, is not a simple explanation as to how or why the network works, but a way of thinking about just how complex and busy that network is, and perhaps also a recognition of the fact that keeping that network together is an occasionally difficult activity that should not be taken for granted.

REFERENCES


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