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Institutional Ethnography and Actor Network Theory: The possibilities and challenges of exploring the relational in adult education research

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Abstract: Adult education practices are imbued with the relational and the material. Drawing on our empirical studies we explore the utility of Actor Network Theory and Institutional Ethnography—theoretically and methodologically—for adult education researchers. A brief theoretical overview of the two perspectives will highlight their convergences and divergences. We then introduce several methodological concepts to explore how IE and ANT encouraged us as researchers to unravel relations, bring relations into view, and attend to coordination/translation. Adult education is a disparate and complex field. Researchers may find the approaches useful in understanding the ways adult education practices are coordinated and connected.

Adult education practices are imbued with the relational and the material. Yet, questions emerge when a researcher wishes to bring the sociomateriality of work-learning or adult literacy educators' practices to the fore. As Bowker and Star (2000) write, "we lack good relational language here. There is a permanent tension between the formal and the empirical, the local and the situated, and attempts to represent information across localities. It is this tension itself which is underexplored and undertheorized" (p. 291). Relations of interest include not only interactions between people, but also understanding materially mediated practices. In our own research, we turned to two different theoretical perspectives: Actor Network Theory (ANT) and Institutional Ethnography (IE). IE has been used by researchers in the field of adult literacy and its potential for adult education has been introduced. Although ANT has been used extensively in other fields, it is more recently finding its way into adult education research. In this paper we will draw from our empirical studies to explore the utility of these perspectives—theoretically and methodologically—for adult education researchers. Both of these perspectives bring unique ontological assumptions and consequently, implications for how one asks research questions, collects and analyzes the data, and writes the research report. We will focus on how these theoretical stances influence various aspects of our research projects. Such exploration will also include consideration of the opportunities and tensions presented by these perspectives.

Theoretical Overview

ANT is a unique collection of relational and material understandings and offers two unique entry points for researchers. First, ANT emphasizes how learning (or anything else) emerges as effect of a network of relations between entities. Such networks include people, objects, ideas, and practices. Second, through the *principle of symmetry,* ANT creates an opening for regarding

"technologies" as actants entwined in relation with other human or non-human actants. Actants—human or non-human—are considered to be co-constituted in webs of relations with other actants. Indeed, entanglements between humans and non-humans make it very difficult to separate the two. ANT is interested in tracing flows and work happening *within* networks of people and objects. Within these networks, ANT looks what is circulating: ideas, practices, actions, intentions, inscriptions, and invocations. ANT focuses on juxtapositions of actors and how these associations come to be. ANT is a philosophical orientation, not a learning theory. Nevertheless, by studying the webs of relations, researchers can better understand the sociomateriality of learning practices.

Similar to ANT, IE is more of a philosophical orientation than learning theory. However it is stridently people-centred. As *a sociology for people* there is an ontological shift from looking at a system or structure to people's doings. Within the ontology is a recognition that what people do is coordinated and relational. People have unique and diverging perspectives based on their experiences, and their actions generate experiences. None of this is static and is always in motion, which evades theorizing. Most importantly, texts mediate and coordinate people's doings. An IE researcher pays attention to *social relations*, the ways particular discourses found in a replicable and material form, a text, are activated to coordinate everyday practices. *Ruling relations* helps the researcher recognize how social relations are themselves coordinated by "a complex of organized practices, including government, law, business, and financial management, professional organizations, and education institutions, as well as the discourses in texts that interpenetrate the multiple sites of power" (Smith, 1987, p. 3).

Both ANT and IE have roots in ethnomethodology. Both are committed to detailed description, are concerned with the relational, and pay particular attention to objects, including texts. Both emphasize the importance of starting with actual experiences and what's happening in the everyday. Neither ANT nor IE speaks of the social *construction* of a phenomena or practice. ANT researchers are concerned with enactment and IE researchers with active organization. Another ontological compatibility is the step away from the traditional micro-macro binary. Latour (2005) prefers to keep the social flat through three moves: localize the global, redistribute the local, and connect the sites. The micro is not embedded in the macro like nested dolls, but rather the macro is an equally local place. Because interactions overflow with ingredients from other times, spaces, and agents, every site becomes the "result of the action at a distance of some other agency" (p. 219). Similarly, IE researchers emphasize translocal relations. In an IE project, the researcher does not have to make particular moves to keep the social flat. It is the texts themselves that are translocal. Using the concept of ruling relations, the researcher pays attention to the ways everyday activity at local sites is coordinated by texts—most often produced elsewhere at other times by other people to standardize, count and control.

However, there are significant differences, namely tensions around the prominence of non-human actants. ANT philosophy advocates that hybrid subject-objects are enacted within networks. Verbeek (2005) writes that the subject and object are mutually constituted in their interrelation and only in these relations does an actant "become". Thus, technologies and people fold into each other. Chefs and knives. Doctors and stethoscopes. Human and non-human actants are in a co-constitutive relationship. In contrast, IE is fundamentally people centred. It is people's experiences within relations that are of concern. An individual is both subject and agent of the text but not co-constituted. Their experience is kept whole as a researcher explores the ways texts organize their everyday world. The ultimate goal of an IE project is to share findings

in a way that leads to change in practice and perspective. For IE to do its liberatory work, people's experiences must remain recognizable to themselves (McCoy, 2008).

Attention to the political is another difference. While IE has much in common with critical approaches and understandings, it is not a critical theory—primarily because IE is not a theory. IE looks at the way seemingly abstract beliefs and policies are activated becoming part of everyday work practices, and not just how they have effects on people. Within adult education IE would be particularly concerned with the ways that certain teaching and learning practices become reportable and accountable, and the ways that practices change in order to be made accountable. ANT is not first and foremost a critical theory. Yet, it does attend to the political. Similar to IE, ANT's work is to help generate understanding of practices but then asks slightly different questions, such as Latour's (2005) concern whether assemblages, once assembled, are actually liveable or Law (2004) and Mol's (2002) work on *ontological politics* to challenge notions of singularity and definiteness. It is not our intent to link these theories without proper respect for their departures. However, both IE and ANT are distinguished by drawing on strong and unique ontological, rather than epistemological, assumptions, which creates openings for conversations such as these.

Drawing from Empirical Work

To explore how researchers might use ANT and IE concepts and methods to examine learning practices, this paper will utilize data from our PhD studies, both of which focused on work or work-learning practices. The first author's study explored how interactions between web-technologies and self-employed workers shape informal work-related learning practices in online communities. Semi-structured interviews with own-account self-employed workers were conducted to explore how they engaged with others online for work related learning and how the online spaces and interactions described might have provided a sense of online community. Note that online communities in this study referred to those outside the auspices of formal online courses: gatherings of people online which were self-managed, organic, and driven by a shared interest. These kinds of spaces may also be purposefully nurtured by professional associations, workplaces, or commercial enterprises. Other participants in this study included: postings, avatars, tool bars, archives, viruses, hyperlinks, the delete button, and passwords. In order to engage with these participants, several heuristics for "interviewing" objects were developed (see Adams & Thompson, in press). The second author's research project is exploring the ways that adult literacy work is coordinated by a literacy regime—a complex of discourses, texts, and ideologies that make their way into adult education practice using technologies related to accountability, large-scale literacy testing, and job-skills frameworks (Darville, 2002). The focus of investigation is on the way adult literacy educators do the work of making literacy learning accountable to the discourse of a federal job skills framework and large-scale international tests of adult literacy. Data was garnered from numerous documents, interviews with 12 educators about their use of particular aspects of the documents, a group discussion, and participant observation during workshops and conferences for educators.

Engaging with ANT and IE

Committing oneself to the exploration of the relational using ANT or IE catapults the researcher down a certain path. Neither is a "toolbox" of methods. Each of these perspectives

influences the *questions* you ask, the *way you explore* your phenomena and *what* you attend to, and the way you *write* it. Both ANT and IE use a handful of methodological concepts, best described as thinking heuristics, rather than data manipulation techniques, to orient the researcher's attention. In this section we will explore how IE and ANT encouraged us as researchers to unravel relations, bring relations into view, and attend to coordination/translation.

Unravel Relations

Identifying and following participants of interest becomes a key preoccupation of ANT or IE researchers. For ANT researchers, the participants in question include the co-constituted human and non-human actors. Because it is primarily the texts in IE that create the challenges discussed here, the IE discussion will focus on texts. Haraway (2004) uses the metaphor of balls of yarn, loosening and untangling knots as one "pulls-out-the-threads" (p. 338). The first challenge is coming to appreciate which participants (including objects and texts) are important. Data collection and analysis strategies therefore remain necessarily fluid and emergent. The second challenge is knowing when to stop. As with balls of yarn, the threads can seem endless and intertwined. Researchers therefore engage in the very political act of setting boundaries.

ANT focuses on *how* questions: How objects, people, ideas, and actions come to be aligned. How something, such as learning or online community, is enacted. The basic premise of ANT is to look at actors bumping around in networks. ANT shies away from assuming that a pre-determined group exists. Rather, by "following the actors", the researcher starts with one actant—a posting, the delete button, a self-employed worker—and from there tries to trace the actor-network(s) in which they are entangled. Because groups are constantly being performed, connections first need to be traced. As these associations are traced, a network is outlined. The point is not to create an exhaustive list of all possible entities in an actor-network but rather to look for "mediators *making* other mediators *do* things", human or non-human (Latour 2005, p. 217). Harman's (2007) analogy is apt: "we cannot discover the nature of a thing by looking into its heart, but must follow the blood that circulates from that thing through all its arteries and far-flung capillaries" (p. 44). The list of actants and actor-networks unfolds throughout the study and cannot be completely determined in advance.

IE is also focused on *how* questions. The intention is to show people how things work, how people are positioned in a coordinated organization of ruling relations, how the technologies of ruling rely on but may not consider actual work practices, and how to make people's "working experience accountable to themselves…rather than to the ruling apparatus of which institutions are a part" (Smith, 1987, p. 178). An IE researcher would follow particular texts, not just a document or policy, although a text may be embedded in a specific document. Rather, a text is the replicable and material representation of a discourse or ideology. An IE project would be shaped by the ways particular texts are used by particular groups, and the ways the text coordinates practice. It is the interconnections between text and practice, and text and other texts that guide the direction and scope of the study.

Bring Relations into View

Both ANT and IE offer useful conceptual tools to bring relations into view. This includes looking at what becomes or is already stabilized: practices, texts, understandings. One of the main challenges of IE is recognizing and making visible this work, especially if it is also the researcher's profession. Smith uses the term *inertia* to explain why we are often unable to recognize how texts coordinate everyday activity. Other IE researchers have used the term *institutional capture* to suggest that we are so hooked into particular relations and discourse that

we may not even have the words to discuss things differently. However, openings and ruptures occur to help bring relations into view. This could be a *disjuncture*—a moment in which one recognizes a break or disconnect between everyday practices and the institutional processes that are used to manage that work. These can be quite benign, but it is the puzzlement, frustration and even anger accompanying a disjuncture that suggests it may be more malign. For Christine, this moment occurred when directed by the program funder to embed a job skills framework into the planning documents used by educators in a literacy program. Reworking the documentation meant that both learners and educators would have to discuss and think about learning using the terms of the job skills framework. Standards have always been a part of adult literacy education, but until the moment when a new set of standards was imposed, Christine had not thought about their meaning and impact.

There are several concepts within ANT to help explore invisible work. The classic ANT approach is to open black-boxes. Latour (1987) explains that when many elements are made to act as one, a black box is created. By patiently tracing threads between human and non-humans actors that appear to be unified and/or foolproof, ANT researchers unpack networks of alliances, often reawakening controversies (Harman, 2009). One ANT strategy for catching glimpses of objects in motion is to study accidents and breakdowns, similar to the IE notion of disjuncture. The invisible is made momentarily visible. This includes the work that is being performed continuously to sustain the links between actors in these networks. For example, in Terrie Lynn's study, ANT was helpful for drawing attention to how the complex work that goes into being engaged online is often unnoticed and unremarkable, despite the significant outlay of time, money, and effort expended by these self-employed workers. Different capacities to negotiate complex sociomaterial practices within the context of work and work-learning became more evident. Digital objects are also often made invisible and othered. And yet, making visible the social life of a posting or digital footprint visible often reveals surprising human-object interconnections.

Attend to Coordination/Translation

Both IE and ANT researchers attend to the work that is going on to maintain practices, activities, and entities. A key working concept in IE is *textually coordinated activity* or *text-reader conversation*. IE researchers recognize the text as active, actively coordinating in different ways. The research is not simply about understanding how texts are read or have different effects, nor is it only about textual and discourse analysis, but seeing how texts coordinate activity and people's work. The text-reader conversation is "an actual interchange between a reader's activating of the text and her or his responses to it" (Smith, 2005, p. 228). The concept of *processing interchanges* is used to draw attention to the ways a particular text enters our work, and is then put to use by literacy educators in learning materials, assessments, and conversations with learners and with each other in order to be institutionally accountable.

Translation is an important ANT concept. Translation describes the actions and alliances at work to keep an actor-network functioning and stabilized. Translation is a relationship that induces two mediators into coexisting (Latour, 2005). And so it is a way of arranging and refers to detours, re-orderings, and renegotiated meanings. Through a series of translations, entities interface with others, change, and become linked. Clarke (2002) explains translation provides a methodological framework for investigating how some understandings come to hold more power than others. What is being performed can be unpacked. Indeed, Fenwick and Edwards (2010)

write: ANT's notion of translation helps to unpick practices, processes, and precepts to trace how things come to be (p. 12).

Implications for Adult Education Research

Along with others (i.e., Darville, 2001; Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Hamilton, 2001), we believe that sociomaterial perspectives offer useful constructs and approaches for educational researchers, especially those interested in the messy problems and tensions inherent in teaching and learning activities. This paper explored how use of relational ontologies can help make the specificities of everyday practices more evident. We brought two such theoretical perspectives to the fore: ANT and IE. Both provide unique methodological stances for inquiry and how we might study our world. We have engaged with these perspectives in our own research, learning that it is often much easier to talk about them than to apply them to one's own research questions, methodology, and data.

We explored three aspects of the research process in which ANT and IE have similar aims, albeit different approaches: unravel relations, bring relations into view, and attend to coordination and translation. It is strategies such as these which enable a researcher to focus on the topography of relations and how to "make things visible, audible, tangible, knowable" (Mol, 2002, p. 33). IE specifically uses the concept of mapping: "a map assembles different work knowledges, positioned differently, and should include, where relevant, an account of the texts coordinating work processes in institutional settings" (Smith, 2005, p. 226). By bringing relations into view, adult education researchers and practitioners are better positioned to find opportunities for intervention and even disruption.

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