Chapter 7
Deconstructing Professionalism:
An Actor–Network Critique of Professional Standards for Teachers in the UK Lifelong Learning Sector

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ABSTRACT

The problematisation of the professional standards for teachers in the UK lifelong learning sector tends to focus on the discourses that the standards embody: discourses that are posited as being based on a restricted or technicist model of professionalism, that fail sufficiently to recognise the lived experiences of teachers within the sector both in terms of professional knowledge and competences, and professional development. This paper takes a different approach, drawing on a branch of material semiotics – actor-network theory – in order to shift the locus of problematisation away from what the standards might mean, to how the standards are physically assembled or instantiated. The paper concludes by suggesting that a first point of problematisation rests not in the discourses that the standards embody, but in the inherent fragilities of any material artefact that has the intention of carrying meaning across spatial, institutional or temporal boundaries.

INTRODUCTION

In 2006, Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK), a quasi-autonomous government-funded body, published a set of professional standards that were intended to provide a framework for the 'professionalisation' of teachers in further, adult, and community education in the UK, a broad and disparate area of provision that is usually referred to as the lifelong learning sector. These LLUK standards themselves replaced an earlier set of standards which had been introduced seven years before by the Further Education National Training Organisation (FEnto). The earlier FEnto standards had been criticised for not adequately meeting the needs of trainee teachers and for failing to reflect the developmental nature of initial teacher education (ITE): they were seen as prescriptive, imposing too heavy a regulatory burden on the

ITE curriculum and focusing on what might be termed the desirable attributes of qualified and experienced, rather than trainee, teachers (Elliot, 2000; Lucas, 2004). Similarly, the LLUK standards have been criticised for positing a restricted, technicist discourse of professional knowledge within the learning and skills sector, akin to a competency-based approach to learning (Finlay et al., 2007; Gleeson & James, 2007; Lucas, 2007).

This paper takes a different approach. Rather than problematising the LLUK standards through an exploration of the discourses relating to teaching, to teacher knowledge or to the pedagogy of initial teacher education that they might – or might not – promulgate, I wish to focus on what at first might seem more mundane or even prosaic matters, but which are, I shall argue, fundamental to an understanding of how a body of professional standards might do their 'work'. I am interested in analysing the LLUK standards not from the point of view of embodying a particular set of discourses or of encouraging – or discouraging – the critical use of particular bodies of professional or technical knowledge, but rather as a reification of a series of conversations, ideas and concepts into a material form: a textual artefact that exists either on paper or on screen, that can in turn generate intertextual hierarchies through being quoted and cited (by students in their essays, in textbooks for trainee teachers or in ITE curriculum documentation, for example). What I mean to stress here is that before academics critique the standards, before university programme leaders embed them within their initial teacher education curricula, before the authors of teacher education textbooks list them at the beginning of a book chapter or before trainee teachers cite them in their assignments, all of these people actually have to get hold of a copy of the standards – in full or in part – and read them.

Thus, it is the processes of firstly reifying the standards into a material form and then distributing or transmitting that reified form across social, geographic or institutional boundaries that I wish to problematise here. I shall begin by providing

some brief details regarding the empirical data on which some of my argument rests. After this, I shall provide a brief description of the main characteristics of an actor-network theory approach. I shall then briefly comment on the nature of professional or occupational standards more generally, before going on to provide an ANT-informed account of the LLUK standards.

Empirical Data: An Explanatory Note

This paper rests on both theoretical and empirical strands. The empirical data used here is drawn from a larger data set collected during the period 2006 to 2009 as part of a PhD funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, exploring assessment practices on one programme of initial teacher education for the lifelong learning sector at an English university. Interview data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with both tutors and students on the PGCE/CertEd course. The narratives produced were analysed 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; Kvale, 2007). 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). Data coding and analysis was carried out using Atlas-Ti (Lewins & Silver, 2007).

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY (ANT)

Conceptualising and then investigating the LLUK framework as a textual artefact requires rather

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