Collaboration in education: Lessons from Actor Network Theory

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Abstract
This chapter concerns the growing interest in networking and partnership in post compulsory education and training in the face of increased risk and uncertainty in the globalised context. Internationally, the sector is evolving in a context of globalisation, and now the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), where schools and other education, training and employment providers are facing increasing challenges in facilitating young people's transitions to secure employment in the context of the risk society (Bauman, 1998; Beck, 1992). The chapter is theoretical but draws on empirical research undertaken in Victoria, Australia to illustrate its arguments around the insights into collaboration that can be gained through the use of Actor Network Theory.

Keywords: Actor Network Theory, post compulsory education and training, interagency collaboration.

Introduction

This chapter concerns the growing interest in networking and partnership in strengthening post compulsory education provision and pedagogy given the increased risk and uncertainty of youth transitions in the globalised context (Appadurai, 2006; Bauman, 1998; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 2002). My intention throughout the chapter will be to engage with these notions of 'risk and uncertainty' from a number of perspectives. My approach is guided by Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2007) and the argument in favour of a 'sociology of associations'. The chapter proceeds in a number of stages. In the early stages I will present a — necessarily limited — overview of the ideas of risk and uncertainty in regard to post compulsory education and training. The chapter will then engage with post compulsory education policy and the uptake of networking and partnership as responses in risk contexts. I close the chapter by offering some principles that might guide our collaborative efforts in education.

Risk, uncertainty and post compulsory education and training

In the globalised context, risk has been induced by the process of modernization itself (Giddens, 2002). In a context of post industrialization, the transition of young people to secure employment has become increasingly uncertain, fostering increased governmental investment to better understand, intervene in and control 'risk'. For Beck (1992), the labour market acts as the motor of individualized risk: the labour market creates dependence on wages and consumption whilst separating the individual from traditional forms of support. While structures such as family, class, gender, race and locality remain significant, albeit in changed ways (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae, 2000), early school leavers lessen the few

resources they hold in an increasingly competitive labour markets: they can be imagined as 'miners' canaries', highly vulnerable to the risk society (Bessant, 2002, p. 33).

At the same time, education itself has been 'economized' with a focus on vocational education, the formation of human capital and a broadening of the role of industry in framing educational objectives and pedagogy (Brown and Lauder, 2004). The globalised context has transformed many work practices (Hutton and Giddens, 2001; Jarvis, 2004); the call for the worker-learner has become ascendant (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear, 1996) and the critical role of education and training systems in the creation of this worker-learner has been established (Grubb, 1996). This process is contributing to a significantly different educational landscape with educators experiencing changing activities, locations, partners, norms, values and modes of conduct (Seddon, 2000) which has, in turn, fostered a policy interest in the potential of networks, partnerships and collaboration as vital tools in global 'knowledge wars' (Brown and Lauder, 2004).

Collaborations in post compulsory education and training

The 'deformed character' of contemporary capitalism (Hutton and Giddens, 2001, p. 6) has not only fostered a concern with 'new-vocationalism' (Brown and Lauder, 2004). It has also fostered a social polarization that, it is argued, can only be rectified by deliberate governmental and industry policies that engage with the adverse consequences for certain groups of new production systems and new labour processes induced by a risky, networked society (OECD, 2003). These 'certain groups' include young people — and particularly young people who leave school early — in transition from education to employment.

A brief review of the 'point of arrival' — that is, employment — provides support for the thesis that transition to employment is more challenging even for those who do secure an initial school qualification. Even before the current Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the youth unemployment rate was persistently well in excess of the overall unemployment rate. In 2008, the youth/adult unemployment ratio was 2.8 on average in the OECD area; in every country youth contended with higher unemployment rates than adults (Scarpetta, Sonnet, and Manfredi, 2010). In Ireland the rate had soared from a low of 9.3% in 2004 to 28.7% in 2010 (OECD, 2011). The advent of the GFC saw the youth unemployment rate in the OECD area reach almost 19%: 15 million youth who wished to work were unemployed (Scarpetta, et al., 2010). Averages, of course, hide the extreme nature of such processes for certain groups of youth and individual countries: in Spain the rate in 2010 had reached 41.6%; in Estonia, Greece and the Slovak Republic rates exceed 30% (OECD, 2011).

Giddens (2002) argues that globalisation 'pushes down': at the same time as nations become too small to solve the big problems of an interconnected world — as evidenced in the course of the GFC— they also become too big, too distant from local actors, to solve the small problems. In late modern society effective problem solving by government is argued to involve interdependency and cooperative efforts: policy development and implementation requires the concerted effort of multiple actors that possess some capability to act; it involves

dependency on others to develop policy and convert it into action (Kickert, Klijn, and Koppenjan, 1997; OECD, 2001, 2003). In the context of the GFC, a key OECD policy priority is the provision of adequate support to minimize the risk of 'scarring' on youth (Scarpetta, et al., 2010). However, networking policy initiatives where government and a broader range of actors work collaboratively for systemic change are already in evidence. A brief overview of one such initiative is now provided.

Local Learning and Employment Networks

> Networks are purposeful social entities characterized by a commitment to quality, rigour, and a focus on outcomes. They are also an effective means of supporting innovation in times of change. In education, networks … assist in the process of re-structuring and re-culturing educational organizations and systems. (OECD 2003, p.153)

In 2001, subsequent to a Ministerial Review (Kirby, 2000), the State government in Victoria, Australia, began a process of implementing a blanket of 31 planning networks that would ultimately cover all of the State. The Review had suggested that youth faced persistent and severe difficulties unknown to previous generations. These problems were frequently concentrated in particular groups and regions. The Report's authors argued that these 'joined-up' problems demanded 'joined-up solutions': a 'whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-community' response.

Local Learning and Employment Networks, or LLEN as they came to be known, were established as Incorporated Associations, a status that was proposed to enhance their ability to collaborate beyond the boundaries that constrain innovation in government-administered structures of post-compulsory education, training and employment. Each LLEN was initially funded by government at AUD400,000 for three years (a sum that reduced with each extension of the original timeframe) and, while accountable to the Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission (VLESC), was managed by the then Department of Education, Employment and Training. The structure of LLEN was dictated: each LLEN would have an Executive Officer and minimal support staff, an elected Committee of Management with categories of representation from the local community, and a network of voluntary members from government agencies, industry, the education and training sector (secondary, tertiary and community), individuals and the broader youth sector.

LLEN have been subject to much research and review (Keating and Robinson, 2003; KPMG, 2008; Robinson and Keating, 2004, 2005; Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission, 2005) including my own ethnographic case study of one LLEN (Kamp, 2005a, 2005b, 2006b, 2009, 2010). While much of this research has focused on the formation and operation of networks, my interest has been on 'what happened': on foregrounding complex configurations of realities (Foucault, 1983) as LLEN actors attempted to implement this policy. This has allowed me to explore the issue of whether, and why, there is movement (of ideas, nodes, passion, people, capitals, learning, trust and so on) across the network as

established and the implications for governance of those insights (Kamp, in press). Actor Network Theory (ANT) offers an alternative approach to engage with such research and it is to a consideration of the possibilities provided by ANT that we now turn.

Thinking about ANT and post compulsory education and training

ANT is an approach to understanding the social that is focused on rendering visible the diverse range of actors — both human and non-human — that constitute the social as a preliminary step to applying 'social' explanations to phenomena: it proposes a 'sociology of associations' (Latour, 2007, p. 9) that contrasts the usual 'sociology of the social'. Latour notes

> in most situations resorting to the sociology of the social is not only reasonable but also indispensible, since it offers convenient shorthand to designate all the ingredients already accepted in the collective realm. ... But in situations where innovations proliferate, where group boundaries are uncertain, when the range of entities to be taken into account fluctuates, the sociology of the social is no longer able to trace actors' new associations. (Latour, 2007, p. 11)

In the case of networks, this shifts our interest from what is deemed to be already assembled to the process of assembling itself. My approach in this section will be organized around the five 'sources of uncertainty' by which Latour builds the case for ANT.

No group, only group formation

Latour's first source of uncertainty challenges us to consider where we should begin if we wish to explore networks. Commonly, the social theorist commences by establishing both the group of interest and the level of analysis; by contrast, ANT argues that we begin by following the actors through 'the traces left behind by their activity of forming and dismantling groups' (Latour, 2007, p. 29). Thus, rather than working within established ontological categories that we unilaterally apply to various agents and then exploring the connections between them, we must focus on what forms as a result of the process of group formation. Critically, the actors we should follow are not only human. I quote:

> It is so crucial *not* to begin with a pronouncement of the sort: 'Social aggregates are mainly made of (x).' It makes no difference if (x) stands for 'individual agent', 'organizations', 'races', 'small bands', 'states', 'persons', 'members', 'will power', 'libido', 'biographies', 'fields', etc. (Latour, 2007, pp. 30, original emphasis)

To this list we can add 'researchers' who also clearly contribute to the process of group formation: they define what Foucault would term the conditions of possibility (Foucault, 1972, 1973, 1977). In a sociology of associations, the 'duty' of forming the group falls to the actors: this renders the 'fabrication mechanisms necessary to keep it alive' visible (ibid, p.31) but also allows the actors to make clear what actually remains outside their set of

associations. ANT suggests that over time a group — in our case, a network — will define its boundaries and the group will appear. Only at this point does it become a *bona fide* part of 'the social' and, paradoxically, its room to innovate is compromised as new associations are no longer being formed.

Action is overtaken

The second source of uncertainty encourages us to emphasize who is acting when action occurs. Here Latour draws attention to a problem in the social sciences where an awareness that we are never alone in carrying out a course of action becomes an assumption that 'social force' has taken over (Latour, 2007, p. 45). Thus, we must move beyond a concern with 'social forces' to a concern with the uncertainties and controversies around who and what is acting when the group acts (ibid, p.46). This, in turn, brings into light the realization that what makes us act has the potential to be assembled in new ways.

A brief example can be provided. In the Victorian example, all LLEN were governed by way of a Performance Agreement with the VLESC. In each of the 31 LLEN, the VLESC thus acted, but this was not one unitary way of acting that 'caused' what actually occurred on the ground for any particular LLEN. In the Geelong LLEN, the Performance Agreement itself was made to act by many other actors. That is, actors within the LLEN *acted back* on the Performance Agreement and, in the process, radically broadened the range of activities in which the group engaged (see Kamp, 2006a for a full review). ANT encourages us to appreciate the necessity of 'remaining puzzled' about how the agencies that make us act *actually* make us act and this must be done by making observable traces 'more or less explicit' (Latour, 2007, p.53).

Objects too have agency

The third source of uncertainty outlined engages with the idea that the range of actors at work in any consideration of 'the social' has to be increased. In ANT, there is a concern with the implements that 'modify a state of affairs by making a difference to an actor' (Latour, 2007, p. 71). Rather than seeing objects as being in the background of human action, they are positioned not as only 'full-blown actors, but also as what explains the contrasted landscape we [start] with' (ibid, p.72). That is, power relations are examined. For Latour, objects are at the origin of social activity. The argument here is to dissolve the categorization of 'social' and 'material' to explore the agency of all sorts of actors including, for example, architecture, documents, supplies, and, significantly in the network society, computers that allow interactions to last longer and reach further.

Thus, researchers need an extended range of tools that allow objects to enter into accounts of 'what happened'. For Latour, being silent is what objects are good at; as such, 'specific tricks' need to be invented to 'make them talk' (2007, p. 79). A number of solutions are offered which include studying innovations (which appear in meetings, plans, trials and so on); producing 'situations of novelty' (which appear when what is 'common' is rendered

exotic by distance in learning, space or time); exploring accidents and breakdowns (which render visible what objects do when they 'break other actors down'); rendering receding objects visible (through the use of archives to 'artificially produce … the state of crisis in which … implements were born'); and, finally, through the use of fiction (where objects can be brought into 'fluid' states) (ibid, p.82). Thus, an account of 'what happened' will be a quality account only if power relations are explored through the 'multiplicity of objects' that transport them.

Matters of fact or matters of concern

The fourth source of uncertainty leads to a suggestion that agencies are engaged with as 'matters of concern' rather than 'matters of fact'. Here, Latour draws on the way that scientific knowledge, including social scientific knowledge, is *constructed* in scientific practice (Law, 2004). In their seminal work, Latour and Woolgar (1986) present a number of 'moves' by which 'facts' are *fabricated* in scientific laboratories: beginning at desks as the hubs of productive units, by way of inscription devices where objects of interest are progressively transformed into texts which are then taken up and used by others, and the way that, in the process, the precarious process of producing this 'trace' of the object of interest gradually melts away.

What is the lesson here for our consideration of networks? ANT suggests that if we learn from the controversies of science studies we can gain a perspective that matters of 'fact' can't describe a 'unified reality'. This is not to say that facts don't exist; rather it is an invitation to trouble premature notions of indisputability (Latour, 2007, p. 116); to continually raise the question of ontology. An example can again be offered. A fundamental issue my research concerned beliefs around 'what is the LLEN': whether human actors believe the network established by government was an entity that should act, or an opportunity for them to act. Without such an exploration the question of the success, or otherwise, of a network becomes unanswerable.

Writing risky accounts

The fifth uncertainty allows the chance to 'mop up' the preceding controversies: it suggests that our explorations of initiatives such as networking must recognize that our reports in themselves are mediators: they transform the meaning of the elements they carry (Latour, 2007, p. 40). ANT reminds us that texts must allow the process of assembling the social to appear; in this approach objective accounts are achieved through actors being scrupulously followed 'all the way to the final report': an ANT account is in itself one that traces a network, that is, 'the string of actions where each participant [human and non-human, subject and author] is treated as a full-blown mediator' (ibid, p.128).

ANT is not necessarily directed at the study of networks. However, in this chapter I have suggested that it offers powerful tools for understanding 'what happens' in network contexts. If we are concerned to realize the potential that has been argued for networking and

collaboration, then these forms of understanding are vital. In Victoria, it was acknowledged that LLEN did not 'live in a rational, linear world' however mechanisms for planning and accountability implied that they did (Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission, 2002, p. 15). If our interest is in 'what happens' in networks initiated in response to the 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber, 1973) of late modern times these lessons from ANT may be worth learning. As Latour notes:

> To add in a messy way to a messy account of a messy world does not seem like a very grandiose activity. But we are not after grandeur: the goal is to produce a science of the social uniquely suited to the specificity of the social in the same way that all other sciences had to invent devious and artificial ways to be true to the specific phenomena on which they wished to get a handle on. (Latour, 2007, p. 136)

Non-concluding thoughts

This final uncertainty has brought us back to the point at which we started: a concern with risk and uncertainty. We began by acknowledging the risk society; in the course of the chapter we consider the risk of young people in transition from education to employment and the uncertainty of policy responses. We have engaged with Latour's five uncertainties to consider a methodological approach that could be more true to the phenomena we need to understand; we have closed with the idea that we must engage with risky accounts. These accounts, in which each of the former uncertainties come together, work against a 'shorthand' understanding of 'what happens' by reaching for a transparent account of how the social is actually assembled and reassembled by its actors. For Latour (2007, p.139) to ask for more — to refuse to feed off uncertainty, to seek certainty — will involve settling for less and, in the process, compromising our ability to ever realize the potential of networks.

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