

GUEST EDITORIAL PREFACE

# Special Issue on Actor-Network Theory and Education

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The study of education – of how educational processes and policies, conceptualised as forms of social projects, are accomplished – is particularly well-suited to analyses through the conceptual lenses afforded to us by actor-network theory (ANT). Indeed, over the past two decades or so, a number of significant pieces of research have been published that draw on ANT in order to problematise and explore issues ranging from the ways that full-time undergraduate curricula are organised and enacted (Nespor, 1994), to the ways in which adult literacy learners are assessed using individual learning plans (Hamilton, 2009). In turn, this journal has also contributed to the study of education using ANT (Rowan and Bigum, 2009; Tummons, 2009). It is in the context of this increasingly significant field of study (Fenwick and Edwards, 2010), that this specially-themed issue of *IJANTTI* emerges. All four of the papers that are presented within this issue rest on ANT. At the same time, these papers all travel in quite different directions – perhaps appropriately, bearing in mind the post-structuralist foundations that ANT rests on.

The first article, *Performativity in Practice: An Actor-Network Account of Professional Teaching Standards* by Dianne Mulcahy, pro-

vides what might be called an actor-network critique of managerial and performativity cultures within the teaching profession. Drawing on a larger study of professional teaching standards conducted amongst both teachers and students of geography in Australian schools, Mulcahy argues that teaching standards should be viewed as materially relative, rather than fixedly authoritative, thereby refocusing the attention of researchers – and perhaps policy makers? – onto the ways that teachers enact their professionalism in the classroom. The second article, *(Un) Locating Learning: Agents of Change in Case-Based Learning* by Michael Tscholl, Uma Patel and Patrick Carmichael, consists of an exploration of case-based educational practices within one Masters' level degree course in the United Kingdom. Acknowledging the complexities of any ANT-based research, the article foregrounds perspectives for education research that address, rather than artificially suppress, multiplicity and ambivalence within pedagogic design. The third article, *Complexifying the 'Visualised' Curriculum with Actor-Network Theory* by Sue De Vincentis, shifts our focus back to Australia, and to the Arts curriculum for primary school children. In this article, De Vincentis uses ANT to unpack the complexities of

curriculum, and to consider the extent to which a curriculum (in this case, a funded arts project) can be aligned to a standards-driven curriculum model. The fourth and final article, *Knowledge in Networks: Knowing in Transactions?* by Sanna Rimpiläinen, takes us back to the UK, and to a large, publicly-funded interdisciplinary project that is currently being undertaken by a consortium of six UK universities with three international partners. The specific focus of Rimpiläinen's paper is what might be termed the epistemology of actor-network theory, and she goes on to consider the implications for epistemology of one of the more significant elements of ANT: the principle of symmetry.

All four of the articles in this special issue of IJANTTI take the time to explicate those aspects of ANT that the analysis presented rests on. That is to say, each paper is keenly aware of the methodological tensions and complexities that surround ANT as a way of thinking about things. So what might such a sensibility imply or mean for research into education practice? From both a personal and an editorial viewpoint, I would argue that ANT provides "a conceptual framework for an investigation of complex activities that take place across temporal, institutional and spatial boundaries" (Tummons, 2010: 348). Four such investigations are presented here, often raising as many if not more questions as they answer, and all demonstrating both the complexities and ambiguities that characterise educational practice, (whether in primary, secondary or tertiary settings), and the ways in which ANT can begin to help us, as researchers, to unpack them.

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