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 for 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-
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