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An object-oriented approach to education policy research: Deepening the analysis through an activity-theoretical and critical discourse analytic framework

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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to current conceptual interest in the policy object as a unit of analysis in education policy research. The theoretical perspectives of activity systems theory and critical discourse analysis are combined in a transdisciplinary framework to provide a fine-grained analysis of policy deliberation and a broader methodological apparatus with which to study discourse and activity. The value of this framework is illustrated through analysis of a policy-oriented text produced by a UK higher education mission group (the University Alliance) in the period preceding the UK general election in 2015. The analysis demonstrates how artefacts are deployed to mediate the policy object and illuminates how the group is claiming space in the policy sphere to challenge traditional constructions of research excellence which deprivilege this group. The emancipatory contribution of this form of strategic critique for policy communities is discussed.

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1. Introduction

In current higher education policy research, there is extensive critique of the ways research and wider performance metrics of international provenance are shaping practices at the national and institutional level. Several analyses point to an increasing isomorphism in higher education policy and attribute this to an increasing institutional orientation to international rankings and metrics (for example, see Deem, Lucas, & Mok, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2015). Marginson and Rhoades (2002) propose the concept of 'glonacal' as an analytical heuristic to capture the dialectic between the macro-dynamics of the international context which influence the normative policy environment but also the micro-dynamics of local variation which shape and influence national policy responses.

The discourse-analytic approach proposed in this paper defines a theoretical and methodological orientation which draws analytic attention to the complex nature of policy genesis and gives detailed consideration to how different meanings are attached to concepts such as research excellence and impact and how associated metrics operate in practice, in material ways. The theoretical perspectives of activity systems theory (AST) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) are combined in a transdisciplinary framework to provide a fine-grained analysis of policy deliberation and provide a broader methodological apparatus with which to study discourse and activity.

This paper seeks to make a methodological contribution relevant to the domain of education policy research. A common critique in this field centres on techno-rational assumptions of a linear, top-down policy design-implementation relationship (see, for example, Trowler, 2002). Increasing concentrations of actor-centred analyses, in response to this critique, foreground the

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creative responses to policy interpretation and enactment in local contexts (see, for example, Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010). Within this vein of research, Sin (2014) conceptualises the policy object as a useful, additional variable in policy research. This perspective provides a way of focusing analytically both on actor conceptions of a policy text (ontology) as well as what policy becomes in practice (enacted ontology), thus reflecting the dialectic between policy design and implementation and emphasising the space for agency and interpretation in enactment. In a comparative study of Master's degree conceptualisations (as influenced by EU Bologna harmonisation policies) in three national contexts, Sin uses policy object ontology to 'designate what policy actors believe the policy object is and how they conceive of it' (2014:446). The present paper responds to this conceptual interest in the policy object as a unit of analysis and extends the focus on how enactment is mediated both by human agency but also by the affordances of artefacts which both enable and constrain activity.

The theoretical discussion is grounded, in the latter sections of the paper, in a context of current debate about the influence of research excellence metrics on policy and practice in the higher education context internationally. An analysis of a policy-oriented text produced by a UK higher education sector 'mission group' illustrates the conceptual and empirical findings which can be derived from this form of transdisciplinary methodology. A common focus in education policy-oriented research is on the response of the policy recipients to top-down policy interventions (see, for example, Ensor, 2015; Bourke, Mentis, & O'Neill, 2013). The focus on lobbying texts produced by potential policy recipients in this analysis provides a valuable insight into the concerns and preoccupations of particular groups in a diverse higher education sector and the proactive strategies deployed to influence government policy.

The principal concern of the paper is to demonstrate the commensurability of the two perspectives used in this analysis (AST and CDA) in terms of ontological stance, emancipatory orientation and complementarity of theoretical and analytical constructs. Critics of CDA emphasise the over-privileging of discourse over action (Engeström, 2005) and a restricted form of analysis which examines discourse independently from the 'practical field of action' (Jones, 2007: 353). The methodological contribution of the proposed approach is to extend the frame of analysis, increase the analytical gains and overcome the perceived tentativeness of discourse analysis (Jones, 2007), (Fairclough, 2009). There is acknowledgement of the need for education policy-oriented research to move beyond critique and offer resources for policy actors to respond (Ashwin & Smith, 2015). The empirical analysis presented later in the paper draws attention to the forms of deployment of contemporary metrics associated with research excellence in shaping and re-defining the object of activity.

The paper is structured in three main parts. The first section demonstrates the value of using AST as a frame for analysis of policy deliberation but identifies some of its limitations; in particular the treatment of discourse. The second part shows the significant compatibilities and complementarity between the two frameworks (AST and CDA). The third section illustrates the approach with data from the UK higher education policy context. The final section identifies the analytical gains from this form of analysis for research and policy communities.

2. Discourse and activity

Engeström's formulation of Activity Systems Theory (AST) builds on antecedent theorisations of human activity as object-oriented, mediated action (Leont'ev, 1978) (see Fig. 1) and is informed by empirical work focused on complex, large-scale distributed work activity in national and international contexts. In the evolution and conceptual development of AST, Engeström displays an increasing regard for discourse in the study of activity but one that is essentially 'one-way', thus falling short of conceptual or

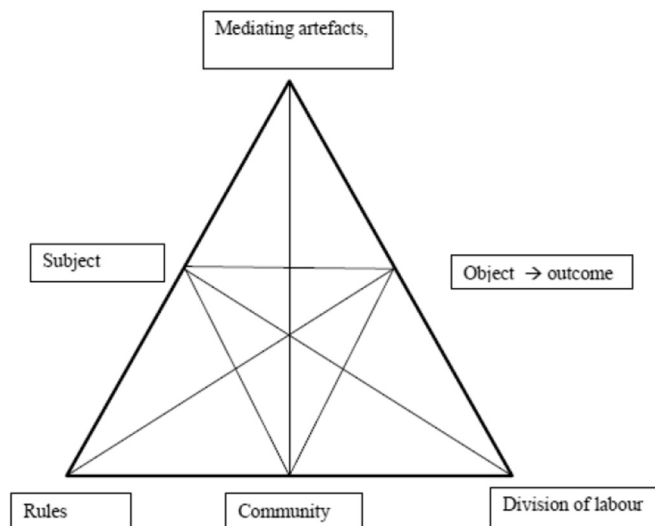


Fig. 1. The human activity system (Engeström, 2005).

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