

Performing Actor-Network Theory in the Post-Secondary Classroom

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ABSTRACT

*Teaching innovative schools of thought call for innovative methods of instruction. This article investigates the challenges associated with teaching Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and proposes a creative pedagogical approach of 'performing' ANT in the classroom. This article presents a small case study of an instance where this theatrical method was employed in an undergraduate classroom to teach Annemarie Mol's *The Body Multiple*. Based on the qualitative data collected from reflections of students and the professor, it investigates the successes of this creative pedagogical approach to teach ANT. This article argues that it is only through innovative teaching methods that ANT can be effectively explored in the classroom.*

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Education, Pedagogy, The Body Multiple, Undergraduate Sociology Students

INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing recognition within the education literature that traditional, lecture-based models are ineffective for rendering sociological theory meaning and relevant to undergraduate students (Holtzman, 2005; Pedersen, 2010). In response to these changing notions of effective teaching methods, several alternative techniques have been proposed to address these recognized deficiencies in current practices. Some scholars have described alternative pedagogical techniques that draw

on the arts and students' creative capacities in the classroom (Phillips, 2000; Lowney, 1998; Gotsch-Thomson, 1990 as cited in Pedersen, 2010). Others have explored how technology can be made to work in the classroom to transform theory into something accessible and engaging for students (Fails, 1988; Sturgis, 1983). And still others have examined techniques of field-based teaching methods, which introduce experiential learning to the instruction of sociological theory (Pedersen, 2010; Hall, 2000).

Despite these moves towards imagining creative and alternative pedagogical approaches, much of this literature has focused

DOI: 10.4018/janti.2011100101

on teaching conventional sociological theories, which often appear in undergraduate sociology curricula, such as functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. To our knowledge, there has been no published literature on new techniques for teaching non-conventional, innovative approaches to sociological inquiry. In an effort to expand this existing pedagogical literature, this article begins with the contention that innovative schools of thought call for innovative methods of instruction. New theory calls for new pedagogy.

This article addresses the challenges associated with teaching Actor-Network Theory (ANT), a relatively new approach to sociological inquiry, by proposing an innovative teaching strategy that bridges the divide between the field and the classroom. ANT is by no means limited to the discipline of Sociology and has both roots and applications in many disciplines such as philosophy, history, anthropology, and science and technology studies. However, given that this article focuses on teaching ANT in the context of a sociology course, ANT will be discussed as an innovative approach to sociological inquiry.

There has been a considerable body of ANT literature: the theoretical and methodological (Latour, 2005; Law, 2004; Law & Hassard, 2005), and the empirical (Epstein, 1996; Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Mol, 2002). Yet very little thought has been devoted to how ANT can be effectively taught in the undergraduate classroom. Given the increasing popularity of ANT as a branch of sociological investigation, it seems imperative that methods for the instruction of ANT are offered and critically considered. This article proposes and examines the effectiveness of an inventive method for teaching ANT to undergraduate sociology students. The following turns to a brief description of Actor-Network Theory before moving to an analysis of our approach for teaching ANT.

ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY

Actor-Network Theory stems from the broader branch of inquiry, Science and Technology

Studies (STS). ANT shares the central interest of STS in the rapidly changing world of science and technology. ANT has been taken up in a multitude of ways within the discipline of sociology and beyond. However, there are a few commonalities, which tie most ANT studies together. They are as follows.

Most work that draws on ANT reflects an interest in moving beyond what ANT scholars have taken to be the limiting, restrictive practices of social science inquiry (Law, 2005). These authors strive to describe action in local settings in ways that do not confine, obscure, or abstract action. ANT studies trace “actors”, which are defined as human and non-human entities that mediate change, as they work to create “networks” of action (Latour, 2005). Work in the field of ANT often tells stories of “complexities”, “translations”, and “multiplicities” found in science (Law & Mol, 2002).

ANT has its roots in anthropology (Latour & Woolgar, 1987). This history is obvious in the vast number of ethnographic ANT studies (Latour & Woolgar, 1987; Dugdale, 1999; Mol, 2005). Other works in ANT have diverged from this path and have instead conducted socio-historical research (Latour, 1988; Epstein, 1996). What ties all of these works together is a shared interest in developing and changing practices in contemporary or historical science and technology.

Law (2006), a well-known Actor-Network Theorist, asserts that one of the most challenging questions that he is often asked is; what *is* ANT? He suggests that to define a sociology which speaks about representations as types of translations or “betrayals” is exceedingly difficult (Law, 2000). He concludes by suggesting that perhaps “one might represent Actor-Network Theory by *performing* it rather than *summarizing* it” (2006, p. 48). While Law was referring to a textual ‘performance’ of Actor-Network Theory, this article will explore a theatrical performance of Actor-Network Theory in the classroom. This article will take seriously Law’s contention that ANT is best understood through performance, and examine a theatrical method of teaching ANT to undergraduate students.

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