Chapter 1
Performativity in Practice:
An Actor-Network Account of Professional Teaching Standards

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ABSTRACT

In the context of neo-liberal education policy reform, professional teaching standards have become one of the main means of managing improvements to school teaching and assuring its quality. Using the methodology of material semiotics in association with video case data of classroom teaching (in this case, school geography teachers) and their students, the author treats a set of standards in action, towards conducting an ontological inquiry. Bringing the performative perspective of actor-network theory to bear not only is sociality taken into account but also materiality. This paper argues that standards are best understood as shifting assemblies of practice whose nature defines and enacts teacher identity and teacher professional knowledge differently in different locations. The conclusion is drawn that while teaching standards 'clot' and can serve to standardise practices of teaching, they are not stable entities. The variable ontology that they manifest challenges the managerialist impulses that tend to drive standards work in education. Altogether, the paper seeks to augment existing accounts of standards within the field of the sociology of science (Bowker & Star, 1999; Star, 2010; Timmermans & Berg, 2003; Timmermans & Epstein, 2010) and contribute to its subfield, the sociology of standards.

INTRODUCTION

Representationalism separates the world into the ontologically disjoint domains of words and things, leaving itself with the dilemma of their linkage such that knowledge is possible. If words are untethered from the material world, how do representations gain a foothold? (Barad, 2003, p. 811)

In the context of neo-liberal education policy reform, professional teaching standards have become one of the main means of managing improvements to teaching and assuring its quality in schools and the wider profession. Providing opportunities for teachers to open up the 'black box' of teaching and learning, and explore these reciprocal processes in an explicit way, they constitute a key element in nations' aspirations to develop

world-class standards of teaching. Drawing on video case data of classroom teaching collected as part of a national study of professional teaching standards, and bringing the practice-based, performative perspective of actor-network theory (Law, 2009a; Law & Singleton, 2000) to bear, I argue that standards are best understood as shifting assemblies of practice – a continuing set of practices whose nature defines and enacts teacher identity and teacher professional knowledge differently in different locations. My interest lies largely in what standards are. Taking seriously actor-network theory's idea[1] that objects, like human subjects, can take different forms in different places and practices (Law, 2002; Mol, 2002; Moser, 2008), I trace the development of a set of standards for teaching school geography, towards conducting an ontological inquiry – studying 'what elements, of whichever character, associated in whichever way', make standards be (Mol & Mesman, 1996, p. 429). No longer single entities with essential attributes, objects, like human subjects, not centered and stable. They take their 'point of departure in relations rather than entities' (Sorensen, 2007, p. 24). Thus, 'an object is something people (or … other objects …) act toward and with' (Star, 2010, p. 603).

My article has three substantive sections. In section two, after some preliminary accounts of teaching standards in which the idea of objects taking different forms in different places and practices is introduced, I sketch some research on standards that is set within recent sociology of science.[2] I follow this sketch with a summary of the central tenets of actor-network theory (ANT) accenting its distinctive performative perspective on complex objects such as teaching standards. Next, in section three, a national empirical study of standards for teaching geography in Australian schools is outlined and details describing the methods used to investigate, and simultaneously develop, these standards are given. Data from this study are then worked via the telling of four

stories of these standards that feature the locales or empirical contexts in which this development took place. Accordingly, I trace the life course of these standards, their shifting shape and forms of assembly in classrooms and the wider profession. In section four, I conclude by discussing the distinctiveness of the contribution of ANT to studies of standards within the sociology of science and what this contribution implies for sociology of standards.

PREQUEL: TOWARD AN ONTOLOGICAL INQUIRY – FIRST STEPS

In beginning my ontological inquiry, I start with policy performances of teaching standards. Following Rizvi and Lingard (2010), I take policy to be the 'authoritative allocation of values' and policy around teaching standards to involve the efforts made by governments and regulatory bodies (such as statutory authorities for the regulation and promotion of the teaching profession) to articulate what is valued about teaching and describe the critical features of what teachers know, believe and are able to do. Set firmly within the domain of words (Barad, 2003), 'standards identify what teachers should know and be able to do' (AEEYSOC National Standards Expert Working Group, 2010). This definition carries along with it the idea that what teachers know can be articulated and that teaching is the type of activity that can and should be captured in standards. 'Standards were invented to develop the capacity to have direct knowledge and access to what was previously opaque' (Popkewitz, 2004, p. 245). It assumes that 'what teachers should know and … do' is a somewhat stable object. Separate from practice, it is something that can be captured in a more or less adequate way in teaching standards – a shared and public 'language of practice' (Yinger, 1987). This version of standards is underscored

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