

Exploring Context Through Actor-Network Theory: An STS Approach to Education Research



Speaker:

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Abstract:

Education policy, sociology of education, and comparative and international education research often describe context as a set of objective conditions that determine, for instance, how policies or ideas are recontextualized within a particular environment. In this presentation, I argue that context is not a neat, bounded container, habitually equated with the state, culture, or nation. An Actor-Network Theory (ANT)-inspired topological exploration of context as a set of shifting and productive relations conceives of space and time as relationally constituted through action, rather than viewing relations or actions as situated within pre-existing spaces and times.

This ANT-inspired approach to context also provides a way to illustrate three central ontological tenets of ANT and their implications for understanding context in educational research. First, it highlights the entanglement of the material and the social, emphasizing the importance of accounting for the materiality of the physical world. Second, it draws attention to ANT's principle of radical symmetry, which, among other things, invites researchers to examine the contexts that actors themselves mobilize. Third, it foregrounds ANT's flat ontology, according to which each actor extends exponentially and in multiple directions. This perspective urges researchers to engage in deep reflexivity regarding how and with what effect they draw boundaries in a complexly entangled world.

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