

Academic domains as political battlegrounds: A global enquiry by 99 academics in the fields of education and technology

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Abstract

This article theorizes the functional relationship between the human components (i.e., scholars) and non-human components (i.e., structural configurations) of academic domains. It is organized around the following question: in what ways have scholars formed and been formed by the structural configurations of their academic domain? The article uses as a case study the academic domain of education and technology to examine this question. Its authorship approach is innovative, with a worldwide collection of academics (99 authors) collaborating to address the proposed question based on their reflections on daily social and academic practices. This collaboration followed a three-round process of contributions via email. Analysis of these scholars' reflective accounts was carried out, and a theoretical proposition was established from this analysis. The proposition is of a mutual (yet not necessarily balanced) power (and therefore political) relationship between the human and non-human constituents of an academic realm, with the two shaping one another. One implication of this proposition is that these non-human elements exist as political 'actors', just like their human counterparts, having 'agency' – which they exercise over humans. This turns academic domains into political (functional or dysfunctional) 'battlefields' wherein both humans and non-humans engage in political activities and actions that form the identity of the academic domain.

For more information about the authorship approach, please see Al Lily AEA (2015) A crowd-authoring project on the scholarship of educational technology. Information Development. doi: 10.1177/0266666915622044.

Keywords

education, technology, academia, power, organizational politics, academic domain, crowd-authoring

Submitted: 12 February, 2016; Accepted: 4 April, 2016.

There exists a mutual relationship of power between scholars and the structural configurations of academic domains.

Introduction

This article examines the ways in which scholars shape and are shaped by the structural characteristics of their academic domain. It uses as a case study the academic domain of education and technology (E&T) to investigate this issue. E&T is used in this article to signify, simply, the area that lies at the intersection of the discipline of education and the discipline of technology. This article is not an investigation of the

content of E&T per se; rather, it is an examination of the daily *social* involvement of E&T scholars in their academic sphere. A literature review reveals an abundance of texts devoted to researching the content

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Information Development
1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/0266666916646415

idv.sagepub.com



beyond the technicality and practicality of E&T and beyond merely procedural and specific writings to analyse this domain from philosophical and political vantage points. This article promotes the idea that philosophical and political concepts and ways of thinking should inform educational and technological analysis, interpretation and discussion; an idea that seems not to have constituted a major component of the contemporary literature up to now (Whitworth, 2005; Hope, 2007; Selwyn and Facer, 2013). One reason for focusing on philosophization and politicization is that the act of addressing the technicality and practicality of E&T is an easy and straightforward task that could be achieved merely by practitioners as part of their social and professional conversations and gatherings. However, the further act of transcending technicality and practicality to 'philosophize' and politicize E&T could be said to be a difficult task. Crowd-authoring can help with this difficult task, with the crowd collectively digging deeper so as to uncover and/or establish philosophical and political grounds and foundations.

One may criticize the current work for lacking an empirical framework that facilitates the authors' attempt to prove the arguments raised throughout the manuscript. However, this research is based on the acts of recording and surveying the views of expert 'informants' in a particular field and their lived experience, providing an innovative approach to empirical evidence that is different from conventional means of seeking empirical evidence. That is, crowd-authoring, through seeking global input and consulting intellectuals' opinions, is, in itself, an innovative empirical methodology. Moreover, it redresses the limitations of traditional research methodologies, including the statistical approach. For instance, the Delphi method, which is similar to the crowd-authoring method, gathers experts' opinions iteratively, but a distortion of an opinion might happen during the quantification process. In contrast, the crowd-authoring method has reduced such a risk since experts record their opinions in the manuscript without the risk of their opinions being eroded or boiled down through a process of quantification or collation. The cross-checking by the mediator and other co-authors in crowd-authoring becomes a procedure that enhances, not discards, the raised arguments. In addition, this study collates the input of 99 qualified figures, which is a sufficient number of samples in statistical law. This survey shall hopefully be the first of subsequent global surveys on fields.

This research has provided a conceptual framework for the political relationship in academia between humans (i.e. scholars) and structures (i.e. configurations of academic domains). Through this framework, specific cases and examples could be viewed in future research (Hilgartner, 2009). In other words, spatial and temporal investigation into specific cases or events of how scholars have affected and/or have been affected by the structural arrangements of their field would be an ideal next step for this work. Indeed, the composition of this article, authored as it has been by an exceptionally large number of academics, could be seen, in itself, to be an appropriate example of scholars' attempts to have an effect on the existing structural arrangements of the social sciences. That is, in the social sciences, most components of academic knowledge production are collective except for authorship. Hence, the crowd-authoring methodology, as a collective authoring style, is a 'disruptive innovation', bringing about a remarkable change in the conventional norm of academic 'authoring soloism' – and thus 'hurting' some conventionalists and businesses.

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