Common Core Controversy:

An Actor Network Theory Exploration of Arizona’s HB 2190

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**Abstract**

The United States’ national educational standards reform movement, the Common Core, is facing opposition. This paper explores some challenges experienced by one Southwestern state legislator’s attempt to overthrow the Common Core. After situating this particular bill within the context of Common Core history, Actor Network Theory methodology is utilized to focus on the interactions among various policy actors as they struggle with the formation, enactment and possible abandonment of policy ideas. In this case, the Common Core policy assemblage is explored through analysis of key pro and con policy actor’s statements and positions within a legislative hearing. Findings include a suggestion of the legislator as a *bricoleur*, or one who assembles diverse resources to create policy, and the roles of divergent views regarding local control, the difference between standards and curriculum, and the role socio-economic backgrounds play in the Common Core policy debate.

**Key Words:** Common Core, Actor Network Theory, State Legislature, Politics

**Author Details**

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Introduction

Another scene in the ongoing drama of the United States’ “Common Core” national educational reform movement opened on February 18, 2015. On that day, the Arizona Legislature’s House Committee on Education held its first hearing and vote on House Bill (HB) 2190. In the dry legal language of state law, the bill related to school curricula. In reality, the bill relates to a great educational policy controversy by seeking to remove Arizona from the Common Core Standards and any other standards adopted by twenty or more states. The bill’s sponsors see themselves as freedom fighters representing parents, students, and educators from across the state in taking a stand against a federal takeover of their right to determine their own children’s education. They want Arizona to truly lead in education by adopting unique state standards designed by and for Arizonans.

By staking these claims, HB 2190’s supporters demonstrated a policy network in action. Current policy research suggests that educational policies, such as the Common Core, are shaped by complex networks of interactions that include constraints, pressures, and enablements (Ball, 1993; Braun, et al., 2011, Koyama, 2014). In other words, policy is neither fixed nor static, but a sophisticated and creative process that is both constrained by the context in which the policy forms and works to change that very context. Actor Network Theory (ANT) provides a methodology to explore this philosophical policy view. By focusing on the minute relations between and among the objects and people involved in policy, ANT provides a means by which to explain the sophisticated socio-material practices inherent to complex policy formations (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011; Gorur & Koyama, 2012).
In this paper, I pursue both a scholar’s and practitioner’s interest in the Common Core controversy. I approach this paper primarily with scholarly intentions to describe and understand one of the significant educational policy issues of our time, the Common Core. However, I also approach this paper on a practitioner and even personal level. The key actor in this particular network analysis represents the legislative district that includes the high school at which I used to be principal. That school and its accompanying district encountered a significant parent, student and educator backlash to the district’s attempts at implementing Common Core. Indeed, the backlash resulted in the district changing their adopted Common Core aligned instructional materials as described in my presentation at last year’s University Council for Educational Administration Convention (Szolowicz, 2014). This paper serves as a “next chapter” that describes the controversy as a state level political issue, but still an issue that affects real students, educators, parents and policy makers.

The Context

HB 2190, as debated on a late afternoon by the Arizona Legislature’s House Committee on Education, primarily prohibited the State Board of Education from adopting the Common Core Standards, the Arizona College and Career Readiness Standards, any Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) standards, or any other standards adopted by the majority of states.

Arizona, and many other states, had adopted the Common Core standards several years earlier in part due to federal government incentive. President Barak Obama’s administration created a “Race to the Top” program in which states could compete for additional federal funds by implementing certain federal requirements. One requirement was that states implement more
rigorous educational standards that would better prepare students for success in the competitive global marketplace. While states were free to choose any such standards, significant work had already been accomplished on the development of the Common Core standards thus making them an easy and obvious choice. Many states opted into the Common Core.

Ironically considering HB 2190’s clear purpose in removing Arizona from the Common Core, a former Arizona governor actually played a key role in the Core’s creation. While Governor of Arizona, Democrat Janet Napolitano served during 2006-2007 as the chair of the National Governor’s Association (NGA). Like all chairs of the NGA, Governor Napolitano had the opportunity to select an area for focus. Napolitano, “…came to the conclusion that America couldn’t lead the world in innovation and remain being competitive if we didn’t have an internationally competitive education system,” (Bidwell, 2014). Using this neo-liberal argument within a globalized market system, Napolitano created a task force of education commissioners, governors, corporate executives and experts in higher education that would revise the standards and standardized testing based system originally implemented by President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind legislation.

Put another way, Napolitano’s methods to achieve an internationally competitive education system was to try to improve on the perceived weaknesses of the existing standards regime. In the Common Core, standards would be kept but made more rigorous and internationally competitive. Standardized testing required of all school children would also remain, but with new and more rigorous standardized tests. In order to meet the new demand for Common Core related teaching materials, textbook companies designed and schools purchased new textbooks.
Not everyone was happy with the changes. On the national level, Education Secretary Duncan even conceded in a speech outlining the administration’s stance regarding the standardized testing associated with Common Core, “In many places, there are simply too many tests that take up too much time, and I know many educators and families and students are frustrated about that,” (Duncan, 2015). Duncan’s remarks only touched the tip of the iceberg regarding the discontent. Previously in Arizona, Governor Jan Brewer had unilaterally changed the name from Common Core to Arizona Standards for College and Career Readiness (Klein, 2013). The 2014 Arizona State Superintendent of Public Instruction race saw the primary election ouster of an incumbent Republican Common Core supporter, the general election defeat of a Democratic pro-Common Core candidate, and the ultimate election of a Common Core opponent. In the Arizona State Legislature House of Representatives race that same November, a pro-Common Core Republican and sitting local school board member was defeated in the primary by an anti-Common Core opponent who went on to win the general election and sponsor House Bill 2190. Primarily an anti-Common Core bill, HB 2190 contained several key points including: prohibiting the adoption of Common Core or any other standards adopted by twenty or more states, establishing a state steering committee to create new standards, requiring new Arizona created standards and restricting the use of student data. As the bill’s primary sponsor, this state representative serves as the primary actor, or starting point, in this Actor Network Analysis of a key educational policy.

**Theory**

Modern educational policy research suggests policy forms as a complex interaction, an assemblage, of ideas. Ball (1993), Braun, Ball, Maguire and Hoskins (2011), and Sobe (2014) agree that policy is a text, but only on the surface. More properly understood, policy is the
production of truth produced by discourses regarding what can be said and taught and who can say what and when and with what authority. Policy is not merely handed from on high, but is always about the changing relationships between the freedom, or agency, to act and the constraints against that freedom. Put another way, policy is not statically written in stone, but rather is formed in real struggles and interpretation in the formation, enactment and abandonment of ideas.

Various researchers have shown how policy as an assemblage finds expression in schools and classroom. Braun, et al., recognize that policy “enactment” involves the interpretation of diverse policies by diverse policy actors within a range of available options. As such, even apparently clearly written national policies can be implemented differently by different schools and local districts. Individuals within those local institutions may have differing experiences and perspectives resulting in differing interpretations and creative implementations of the policy. Likewise, Koyama (2014) argues principals act as “bricoleurs” those who creatively pull together ideas and material objects that may be at hand. The bricoleur is not so much an automaton to the strict letter of the policy as a creative assembler of resources in accomplishing diverse tasks. Both Braun, et al, and Koyama therefore see policy formation and implementation as an ongoing, fluid, creative and negotiated process.

The assemblage of policy is not limited to local or even state levels. Halpin and Troyna (1995) and Phillips and Ochoa (2003) both explore the processes and politics of “policy borrowing” in which nations, states, or localities adopt policies developed elsewhere as their own. While policies often are adopted with the intent of using others’ creative solutions to similar problems, policy borrowing frequently also only lends legitimacy to local policies that relate to the ones being borrowed. Policy borrowing has perhaps become more prevalent in our
increasingly globalized world. Sobe (2014) suggests that globalization provided new means, or networks, through which policies diffuse, translate, transform, become durable, or are dropped. Likewise, Dale (1999) argues the pressures of globalization produce identifiable mechanisms through which sovereign nations cope through their educational policies with this new hegemony. Both carry implications for state and local education policies as well.

The very complexity of policy assembled from relationships and interactions makes research a difficult task. Actor Network Theory (ANT) provides a methodological tool to examine and explain these messy policy processes (Fenwick and Edwards, 2011a; Fenwick & Edwards, 2011b; Gorur & Koyama, 2012; Latour, 2005; Sobe, 2014). Particularly, ANT traces the politics of the negotiations that occur at each junction or relational connection where people and objects change and transform each other. In this sense then, ANT perhaps is misnamed. It is not a theory in the sense that it provides a framework for understanding the world, rather it is more of an approach or a set of practices that aid in understanding. ANT does not therefore seek to explain phenomena so much as it seeks to describe that phenomena. The phenomena itself contains particular assumptions. ANT does not look primarily at people or objects, although both are important, but rather looks at how people and objects come together, stay together, and influence each other to create powerful new effects such as new policies.

Some definitions may provide useful insight. While ANT does not provide a framework for explaining the world, definitions of key terms do provide a framework for approaching and explaining the world (Fenwick and Edwards, 2011b). *Actors* are things, often but not always people, that produce force. As Gorur and Koyama (2012) suggest in their ANT based material semiotics approach, actors can also include objects such as policy texts in addition to individuals. To further complicate the actor profile, some actors may perform in a network directly. Others
may act through \textit{delegation} or their ability to act through distances. Actors come together in \textit{connections}, essentially relationships that can be long-lasting, tenuous, elastic or brittle. While identifying connections helps map the actors in the network, the connections primarily serve as a starting point for identifying translations. \textit{Translations} form the heart of ANT for these are the points of connection where one actor has worked upon another to change it to become part of a network of coordinated things. Translations and their resulting networks are never pre-given or automatically determined. Rather, actors create translations by coming together in connections where negotiations using persuasion, force, logic, seduction and subterfuge result in lasting change. As these dynamic attempts to change other actors begin to settle, a process of \textit{stabilization} begins. In a stabilized state, the network appears peaceful and natural, but the negotiations that brought it into existence are concealed.

Because ANT is an approach and not a theory in the strict sense, a researcher utilizing ANT possesses a great deal of flexibility in approaching the researched phenomena. However, some limits do exist. Networks can often be extensive. At some point the researcher must cut the network. As Yin (2009) requires a researcher to place clear boundaries on a case study, so an ANT researcher must define the network in time and space (Fenwick and Edwards, 2011b). In doing so, the researcher must cut off portions of the network to research. Cutting the network creates some research problems. First, care must be taken on where the networks are cut as these decisions can be influenced by researcher bias. Second, in cutting the networks the visible aspects of the network’s reality often remain while the invisible supports that created the visible reality may be lost. Third, ANT is designed more for description of existing phenomena, the approach may be weaker in providing explanation for that phenomena. Finally, the researcher
should also avoid the mistake of collapsing all connections into the network. Not all connections are critical to the network, rather it is the translations produced by some connections that are key.

**Methods**

For this study, I begin with the primary sponsor of the state’s anti-Common Core bill. Due to his sponsorship of the bill, this legislator serves as a key policy actor and therefore a substantive starting point from which to trace policy influences. Further, the sponsor’s district includes the high school and community of which I was principal at the time of community reaction against the local school district Common Core based curriculum reform. In my previous work describing that local story (Szolowicz, 2014), I suggest that the local scene was only part of a larger state and national drama. I see this paper as an exploration of the local movement’s reach to the state level.

Before proceeding, I must provide a note regarding identification of actors in this paper. The data focus on a legislative hearing (HB 2190, 2015). Due to the public, transparent, and political nature of legislative hearings, I would feel comfortable identifying by name each of the policy actors who choose to participate in the process. However, providing specific names may actually distract from the ideas, arguments and translations that are actually being explored in this policy making process. Therefore, I identify actors through their roles in this particular drama. The bill’s sponsor is referred to as “the sponsor,” committee members as such, and speakers according to their own self-identified role such as “teacher-of-the-year” or “associate superintendent.” At times, more than one actor with the same title, such as committee member, appears in a given debate. In these cases, the first opponent to speak is identified as “the
Having chosen a principle actor, I then sought his network connections. This process began in the spring of 2015 with the sponsor’s campaign website, which at that time was still actively being updated, a search for media articles regarding the representative, and a search for speeches or other public comments regarding his educational stands. One such comment is the sponsor’s speech to the Education Committee regarding his amendment to House Bill 2190. This speech in turn is situated in an arena of other key actors. Individuals able and willing to attend and speak at a legislative committee meeting must include key actors regarding the subject. Hence, I cut the network to focus on the actors present at this meeting. In addition to analyzing their interactions, I also explored the campaign website for each committee member and sought demographic data regarding their district from the Arizona Legislature’s own website (AIRC, 2015). All this discourse data was analyzed inductively to identify key translations.

The resulting study therefore looks at the minute and public negotiations that occur at the point where various actors are attempting to persuade each other. Like other ANT explorations, this study primarily provides description for this policy-making process. Once the description is created through the actors telling their own stories through their public comments and actions, some policy-related theory can be helpful in providing a “map” of understanding the processes at play and is therefore included in the discussion.

Findings

As is typical for a legislative hearing, the proceedings for House Bill 2190’s agenda item commenced with a summary reading of the bill. Technically, the proceedings were about a
strike-all amendment that replaced the original language with a new policy essentially removing the Common Core from the state’s educational system. The amendment was introduced by a newly elected state legislator representing a relatively affluent district that also included several retirement communities. The sponsor had campaigned on positions that emphasized local control of education. He also supported a states’ rights approach to multiple issues with federal implications.

The sponsor’s proposed amendment reflected these local and states’ rights themes through multiple key points. First and foremost, the bill prohibited the State Board of Education from adopting the Common Core Standards, the Arizona College and Career Readiness Standards, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College or Careers (PARCC) standards, or any standards adopted by the majority of states. The bill also voided any State Standards already in place that conflict with the law. While Arizona had adopted the Common Core standards and joined the PARCC consortium, opposition to these moves had started well before the sponsor introduced his bill. In response to this opposition, then Arizona Governor Jan Brewer had previously announced a name change shifting the focus away from the, “common,” core to the more state specific, “Arizona College and Career Readiness Standards.” The standards themselves remained substantively the same leading one national news organization to declare, “Some think Arizona is trying to trick activists with Common Core name change” (Klein, 2013); hence, Arizona College and Career Readiness Standards’ specific inclusion in this bill.

The final element of the amendment’s first point is also worthy of further exploration. Some of the first comments from committee members regarding the bill focused on the final point prohibiting Arizona from adopting any standards substantively similar to the majority of
other states. While the state’s rights intent and implications for Arizona are readily evident in this statement, some of the first comments from committee members revolved around this issue. For example, one committee member, a former elementary school teacher, wondered if this language would prohibit Arizona’s first graders from learning their colors or the alphabet or similar typical first grade material if the majority of other state’s first graders were also learning their colors and alphabet.

The local control and state’s rights themes continued in the bill’s other elements. To replace the outgoing Common Core standards, the bill called for a statewide steering committee to develop new standards. Technical details, such as a deadline for the new standard’s adoption about two years following the bill’s passage, were set. The bill prohibited the adoption of any set of standards until after public meetings regarding the proposed standards were held in each congressional district in the state. Likewise, standards could not be adopted by the State Board of Education until both the newly created steering committee and the state legislature had approved the new standards. Finally, the bill established restrictions on the use of student data.

While the sponsor was not a member of the House Committee on Education, he did speak regarding his bill, possibly at the request of kindred-spirited committee members. Caucasian and representing a district that includes relatively affluent communities, some retirement communities, and relatively fewer children than other districts, the sponsor gave his speech about ten minutes into the agenda item. Perhaps as expected from the bill’s language, local control formed the primary point. However, the definition of this state legislature’s definition of “local control” emphasized state-level control. Referencing two municipalities in different areas of the state, the sponsor argued that a child moving from, “Vail to Awhautukee,” should experience the same state-wide educational standards. Pivoting to address the federal influence of the Common
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Core standards, the sponsor argued that state control was usurped by various non-governmental organizations allied with the federal government. He argued this combined alliance required that the federal standards are, “…copyrighted material that must be taught in certain ways with…certain information.”

In making this happen, the Common Core standards, “indoctrinated,” students into lower expectations, the opposite of the creativity and high standards the Common Core had promised. The sponsor noted this indoctrination, which he claimed “key” educators refused to sign off on having been, “ignored and dismissed,” was in fact turning Arizona’s students into little more than, “worker bees.” He stated that legislators in other states including Washington and Ohio were also demanding that their states leave the Common Core, “immediately and forthwith,” for similar reasons. Returning to why this bill was good for Arizonans, the sponsor noted that the current standards and testing structure left too many loopholes for, “educrats,” to actually fail and yet be considered a success. He called this the, “everybody gets a trophy syndrome,” that was ill preparing Arizona’s students for the, “global market.” Considering this global market place, the sponsor also argued that pursuing any standards that were common either nationally imposed or that were even similar to other states, would leave Arizona’s students behind. If Arizona really wanted to be a leader in education, he argued, how can Arizonans juxtapose their standards against anyone else’s? In other words, Arizona needed to dare to be different.

While I’m presenting this next part a bit out of order from the original speech’s chronology, the sponsor made another argument related to federal overreach. Emphasizing individual privacy rights, the sponsor argued the Common Core actually violates United States code by requiring the release of personally identifiable information and requiring the tracking of such data through an individual’s life. Making a distinction between, “cognitive,” and “non-
cognitive,” data, he argued that, “cognitive,” data did serve a valuable purpose for educators directly involved in a student’s learning, “Certainly, it is their [educators’] business to know how I’m [as a student] progressing.” He vehemently argued, however, that the release of both cognitive and non-cognitive data to those who do not have a direct need to know should be prohibited. Such data should not be, “harvested,” by either public or private entities and that non-cognitive data is, “not the government’s business,” and therefore should not be, “part of the program.” Although the sponsor did not go into much detail regarding what non-cognitive data might be mined, later in the hearing an ally on the committee gave examples such as, “Do your parents fight?” and, “Do you own a firearm in your home?”

Following the speech, several legislators both asked the sponsor questions and engaged in debate amongst themselves. One committee member, who ended up voting against the bill and hence for the Common Core, stated he is a former teacher and current university instructor. This committee member represented a district of relative poverty with a relatively higher percentage of children. He also is the committee’s only African-American member. He asked the sponsor to specifically name a Common Core standard he, “had a problem with,” to which the sponsor replied he did not have the standards in front of him and therefore, “I’m afraid I am at a loss.” Turning to the issue of critical thinking which the sponsor had mentioned in his speech and that forms a significant argument in the Common Core’s creation, the committee member pressed the sponsor to agree that, “we want our students to be critical thinkers, project based learners, and problem solvers?” The sponsor did agree, but with clarifications. The sponsor proceeded to explain the Common Core deconstructs math by going through a, “Rube Goldberg,” like process that creates, “machine thinking,” instead of true critical thinking.
Further pressing his query of the sponsor, the committee member shifted to a question regarding if there is a difference between standards and curriculum. The sponsor replied with a story from one school district in which a parent challenged the Common Core mandated reading of a hardcore pornographic, “XXX,” book in the eighth grade. The committee member pointed out that in his view the school district had adopted the book as part of their curriculum, and that the district’s adoption had nothing to do with Common Core. In other words, standards and curriculum are different and that the current Common Core standards still allowed local district control of the materials used. The committee members emphasized his view that all should have the same finish line, but local school districts with their communities could choose how to get there. The sponsor, replied, “I beg to differ with you, sir,” and argued that his adversary’s distinction between curriculum, assessment and standards is, “incorrect.” Another committee member rose to the sponsor’s defense. Like the sponsor, this Caucasian committee member also represented a district with relative affluence and relatively fewer children. He argued the Common Core removed district control of materials and teaching processes by presenting the same material from the same small group of, “for profit corporations.” These Common Core mandated materials, he argued, were, “junk,” and that there are, “many,” examples that he could give of that.

With this heated, at least by legislative hearing standards, exchange cooling off, another committee member returned to his previous questioning regarding the bill’s language prohibiting the adoption of standards utilized by 20 or more states. This committee member, like his fellow anti-Common Core colleagues, is also Caucasian and represents a relatively affluent district. However, unlike his colleagues, he had reservations regarding the bill. In fact, while he did vote for the bill’s passage out of committee, he specifically reserved the right to change his mind.
when the bill appeared before the entire House. The sponsor did not believe his bill would prohibit the teaching of concepts such as colors and alphabet commonly found in typical grade-levels. However, the sponsor deferred to both the Legislature’s legal counsel and to a speaker from an anti-Common Core think tank to further address the concern.

Multiple speakers were subsequently invited to provide their voice regarding the bill. Each speaker was typically provided a time limit of several minutes. Speakers had to state their intention to speak by completing a card available in the hearing room and were called one at a time to the lectern. Not everyone who registered to speak actually gave a speech. Nevertheless, a variety of perspectives and interests were represented including parents, teachers, school-district level administration, and the business community. The following selected speakers typify arguments both pro and con to the Common Core. They also represent exchanges between the speaker and the committee members.

One speaker claimed to represent, “thousands of Arizona parents against the Common Core.” Following an, “uproar,” in her community, this parent turned activist researched Common Core through the internet and noted the Core’s promise of, “internationally benchmarked,” standards where schools would retain control of the curriculum. However, in her experience, the Common Core required changes to the curriculum, instructional materials, and assessments. Her children’s previously high-performing schools were declining despite expensive investments to meet the new standards’ challenges. She further argued the standards themselves required outdated teaching methods further harming her children’s education. Noting that the standards did not fulfill their promise of being state-led, she urged a, “yes,” vote against the Common Core. In questioning the speaker, a pro-Common Core committee member asked if would be, “ok,” if they had been developed by Arizona parents and educators. The speaker
responded negatively as she found the standards sub-par, developmentally inappropriate, and that she as a parent had problems with particular standards.

Continuing his pro-Common Core questioning, but with another speaker, the committee member finally found an ally as an Arizona Teacher-Of-The-Year rose in favor of keeping the Common Core. The teacher-of-the-year argued returning to the old standards would be a, “slap in the face,” to all the teachers who had worked so hard to implement these challenging new standards. The committee member queried the teacher-of-the-year if there had been an increase in critical thinking under the Common Core. Responding affirmatively, the teacher-of-the-year provided anecdotes of better student papers with better supporting evidence. In response to questions regarding how her district had chosen materials, the teacher-of-the-year responded they had complete district control with parent input regarding their material selection, although they did use, “exemplars,” from the state of Texas. In one of her few questions or statements in the hearing, a pro-Common Core legislator representing a relatively rural, relatively less affluent, district with relatively higher percentages of children, asked if other district’s had the same freedom of choice as did the teacher-of-the-year’s district. The teacher-of-the-year responded that some do and some do not but that the curriculum is what the community builds together while the standards state what needs to be learned at the end of each grade level.

Also supportive of the Common Core, an associate superintendent rose to speak. Like some members of the audience, she wore a blue “Teachers for Common Core” button. In describing the 2.5 million dollars her district spent to purchase new Common Core related materials, she emphasized the expenditure shows how local districts retain control over their own decisions, “Our community, and our school board, and our parents have reviewed all materials…and approved them.” She also noted students are, “problem solving…not
memorizing rote facts, things you can google on the internet.” Like the teacher-of-the-year before her, she noted the shift in student writing with many, “great,” and, “fabulous,” things.

Two legislators responded with one noting the instructional methods would not change with a change in standards and the other noting putting students in groups is not necessarily Common Core but is “good teaching methods” as they argued the difference, if any, between standards and practice.

Again as typical for a legislative hearing, the list of speakers eventually subsided as those present either shared their view or simply left the hearing. The time had come for the committee members to cast their votes. Several of the committee members voting “yes” offered brief explanations for their votes. One member noted the confusion among parents and communities regarding what the Common Core standards do and what they accomplish. He felt this confusion brought great instability to the state. However, he also had concerns regarding the language of this particular bill as he would, “hate,” to, “prohibit,” ourselves from adopting needed standards if 20 or more states also adopted the standards. His colleague expressed hope the wording issues would be resolved and noted no maliciousness from him toward any speaker as he believes everyone is seeking what is best for the state’s children. The finale “aye” vote came with an explanation that the Common Core represented a, “threat from the federal government,” and that the focus should be on student learning.

Two members voted against the bill and thus supported the Common Core. One committee member who had been particularly vocal in his Common Core support, noted the, “bill will pass committee,” before focusing on his colleague’s issue with the language prohibiting adoption of standards already accepted by other states. He noted, “that is and will be an issue.” In noting his support for higher education, he also believed the Common Core brought higher
standards and more critical thinking. In the final “no” vote, the voting member expressed appreciation for the parents present at the hearing. She noted her district included many farming and military families with high mobility rates. She stated, “Where you see federal overreach, I see facilitation.” She explained that her district sees a lot of student from many states. To be able to transition schools more easily and see expectations is not over reach, but helps students and parents make a consistent transition.

Following about three hours of debate, with five “aye” and two “no” votes, the amended House Bill 2190 passed the House Education Committee with a, “due pass recommendation,” and was sent to the whole Arizona House for further consideration.

Discussion

Legislators, like school principals, can act as bricoleurs in assembling policy. In this case, Arizona’s House Bill 2190 served as an anti-Common Core assemblage reflecting multiple network inputs that resulted in one policy including issues as diverse as standards, local control, and privacy rights. Both as a key sponsor of the HB 2190 bill and as an ally of the committee members who support the bill and oppose Common Core, the bill’s sponsor explained his amendment to the committee. While only a brief five minutes long, the speech reveals an eclectic mix of policy ideas amalgamated into his one amendment. Control forms the amendment’s centerpiece. The sponsor unequivocally states he wants, “local control,” and proceeds to define local control as state control. He wants a child who moves from one community in the state to another to have the same education. He also argues that there is no collaborative process in the Common Core, but rather state control was, “usurped,” by the
federal government. This usurpation has led to not only a lowering of creativity but the, “indoctrination,” of the federal, “worker bees.”

The issues of control begin but do not end with the state and federal conflict. The sponsor argues that the Common Core requirements violate individual’s privacy rights by allowing both, “private entities,” and the federal government to, “harvest,” personal cognitive and non-cognitive data. While conceding that educators need to know how students are progressing cognitively, he adamantly denies that non-cognitive data should be collected or shared as, “frankly, it’s not the government’s business.” He wants data to be, “put out of reach,” of anyone not specifically engaged in the K-12 education system.

Returning to his theme of standards by Arizonans for Arizonans, the sponsor argues that Arizona should be a leader in education. He wants Arizona’s children to be fully prepared for the, “global market,” thus showing how global accountability systems are diffused into this state level proposal. For these reasons, he opposes adopting any national standards or even those standards adopted by twenty or more states. On the other hand, he seems to borrow from other states such in, “demanding,” Arizona, “exit,” the Common Core, “immediately and forthwith,” just like Washington and Ohio seem to be doing. In doing so, he seems to be using other states’ policies to legitimate his own proposals.

Following his prepared statement, committee members proceeded to ask questions thus providing insight into potential policy translation points. One such question emerged from another legislator who ended up opposing the amendment. In a somewhat heated exchange, the opponent created another element of assemblage and simultaneously sparked a point of potential translation by arguing that standards and curriculum are different. In doing so, the opponent
formulated another, competing, definition of, “local control.” In the opponent’s view, standards and curriculum are separate. He argues the state should set standards but that local districts and schools can maintain local control of the curriculum and instructional methods used to meet those standards. The sponsor clearly rejects this view, stating, “I beg to differ with you, sir,” and arguing that the standards mandate the curriculum. He argues that his proposal in HB 2190 to create a state level curriculum steering committee would address this situation. Another legislator agreed with the sponsor and cited anecdotal evidence of schools being forced to adopt curricular materials they did not like because of Common Core.

However, the opponent and others disagreed with a state teacher-of-the-year and an associate superintendent who both testified the parents in their districts had created or purchased their own curriculum with their own parental input. A second opponent took the local control one step further and in a sense brought it full circle. Mirroring the sponsor’s argument that students should be able to move from community to community within the state without a loss of educational continuity, the second opponent also focused on the issue of movement. She applied the sponsor’s argument to the national level suggesting that students moving into her district’s military base from other states should have the same educational standards as other states. The second opponent voted against HB 2190 (and thus for Common Core), the opposite of the sponsor’s stance.

Further, another member also questioned the limits of local or state control by challenging the practical efficacy of prohibiting standards adopted by 20 or more other states. Would this restriction prohibit Arizona’s first graders from learning their colors? Even at the hearing’s end, this issue remained unresolved with only a promise of clarification from legal counsel. Hence, the issue of “local control” and what “local” really means, remains a point of
transaction in this debate. The definition of “local” divides actors while simultaneously providing a point upon which they might create a new assemblage as the sponsor attempted to do in proposing a state curriculum review committee in HB 2190.

Actor Network Theory suggests that not all interactions are significant to a final policy network. In this case, the actors significantly interacted over varying definitions of, “local,” control and varying definitions of the difference between standards and curriculum. Both of these issues engaged actors from both sides of the debate. However, other issues were raised that did not seem to create the same engagement much less potential for policy translation. One pro-Common Core committee member repeatedly raised the issue of, “critical thinking.” However, Common Core foes did not significantly engage in the issue. Similarly, Common Core foes, including the sponsor, raised the issue of privacy rights revolving around the, “harvesting,” of student data. Nevertheless, privacy rights did not seem to feature prominently in the Common Core’s supporters thinking.

One committee member’s reference to her district’s demographics provides another insight into another potential policy actor. Of the seven member committee, five voted for the bill, hence opposing Common Core, while two voted against the bill. In her vote against the bill, one legislator noted her rural and military based district sees the Common Core as more rigorous standards that will help and not hurt parents and students. Likewise, one opponent in explaining his “no” vote noted that he is constantly fighting for higher standards and critical thinking, objectives Common Core provides. Both opponents’ districts average 20 percent non-Hispanic white residents. Conversely, the five districts represented by the “aye” votes, and including the sixth district of the sponsor, average over 60 percent non-Hispanic white. Put another way, anti-Common Core districts are predominately white. Ethnicity and economic status tend to be
linked in the United States. Here, the two “no” votes represented relatively poor areas, an inner-city district and rural farming district, while the “yes” votes tended to represent more affluent suburban districts. Because this bill is about education of children, further examining the age demographics of the two sides may also prove relevant. Indeed, the “no” vote districts are 31 percent children under the age of 18 while the “aye” vote districts average 22 percent children. Actor Network Theory suggests that non-human actors can play influential roles in policy creation and implementation. The demographic divides in this debate indicate socio-economic status plays a role in the Common Core debate.

Conclusions

Actor Network Theory provides a useful tool for describing the complex assemblage of policy formation. In this case, the theory’s methodological approach allows key actors to describe and create their policy networks regarding Arizona’s ongoing Common Core debate. The policy networks result in the legislator as bricoleur and include translative arguments over who controls the curriculum, the difference between standards and curriculum, and point to the active actor of socio-economics.

Caution must be used though. Networks can be infinitely complex and therefore must be “cut” at some point. The cutting points may conceal important network connections. Indeed, this study is limited both by utilizing only publically sourced data and by examining only one committee hearing. Expanding this study to include interviews that would probe “behind the scenes” and expand the scope to the full Arizona House and Senate debates could provide additional insight into the Arizona Common Core debate and perhaps additional methodological insight into Actor Network Theory.
References


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