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Culture and culture change in a higher education context: what works and what doesn't?

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Abstract: Organisational culture and culture change are related concepts which have their origins in organisational studies, but also have relevance to higher education and the constitution of contemporary universities. This paper first explores definitions of and approaches to organisational culture and culture change. Two specific theories are then favoured as being particularly useful when planning and undertaking change initiatives in higher education environments – these being 'multiple cultural configurations' and the 'meso' theory. Based on a literature review of thirty six studies, arguments are put forward for their wider application in higher education change contexts. In addition, a critique of more popular technical rationalist approaches for the management of change is presented.

Keywords: organisational culture; culture change; meso theory.

Introduction and central line of argument

This paper will review selected literature about the related areas of organisational culture and culture change, and put forward an argument about how specific theories and approaches to culture and culture change might best be applied in a higher education context. In the context of this paper, 'change' is being considered at medium or large-scale levels: for example at faculty, institutional or cross-institutional level. The rest of the paper will be organised as follows. First, it will explore the concept of organisational culture and present some definitions and interpretations of this term. Next, the concept of culture change is introduced, after which a number of related theories will be considered. In the main body of the work, it will be argued that there are inherent weaknesses associated with technical rationalist approaches to culture change, which are frequently drawn upon as the dominant approach to managing culture or cultural change within a higher education context. Instead, it will be advocated that a particular approach to organisational culture (Alvesson, 1993, 2002) along with the meso theory of educational change (Trowler, 2005, 2008) have more to offer towards the achievement of successful change in contemporary higher education institutions. It would seem that such a discussion is particularly relevant at the present time as policy makers in large organisations such as universities are constantly involved in the design and implementation of change initiatives. Also, following recommendations of the Browne Review (2010), it appears likely that change will remain an ongoing theme and reality for most staff within the sector.

Defining organisational culture

Although its origins lie rather earlier, interest in organisational culture gained prominence from the late 1970s. It is referred to here simply as culture because most reference made here is to culture at the organisational level, though a distinction – perhaps a rather artificial one – is often made with culture at the national level.

Regardless, a work which addresses culture needs to include some form of explanation of the term, and there are many such accounts available. Those by Alvesson (1993, 2002), Alvesson & Sveningsson (2008), Archer (1996), Hofstede & Hofstede (2004), Kezar & Eckel (2002), Silver (2003) and Trowler (2008) are all valuable in that they provide a perspective about the term and some discussion of what culture *is*. Yet whilst it is convenient (or perhaps 'lazy', Gerth & Mills, 1970) to assume a particular definition, it is still helpful to apply one in a literature review that is largely focused on culture. Consequently, Barnett's (1990) definition will be used here, as he makes reference to an academic culture:

> …a shared set of meanings, beliefs, understanding and ideas; in short, a taken-for-granted way of life, in which there is a reasonably clear difference between those on the inside and those on the outside of the community. Part of the sharing, and sense of the community, resides in the taken-for-granted aspects of the culture. (Barnett, 1990, p. 97).

Barnett's account is helpful as it considers culture and culture change in an academic context.

Further developing our understanding of culture

Whilst a definition has been provided, there is a need to recognise that the cultural term is complex and used differently in specific contexts. As a result, various approaches for understanding culture have been developed. To begin with, it is worth mentioning the influential and popular approach of Johnson & Scholes (1992). In their cultural web model, specific attributes and characteristics of culture are presented in a series of overlapping circles; these include attributes such as structures, symbols and rituals. The authors argue that by gaining an understanding of each of these attributes – the various interlinked parts of the cultural web – a culture can be changed or created. There is no doubt that such a model is helpful in providing a depiction of key components of culture, how these components might interact with one another, and how they might be changed or enhanced. Further, Johnson & Scholes have been helpful in fore-grounding the importance of organisational culture and structure. However, such a model is also descriptive and under-theorised, and appears to assume that culture is something that can always be managed or changed.

As a means of demonstrating the greater complexity of the cultural concept, it is helpful to draw on Trowler's (2008) classification of four approaches for understanding culture. First, *nomothetic* approaches assume a top-down view, usually involving an attempt to create or define a culture: many early models have drawn on a nomothetic, functionalist perspective of this type. Second, *idiographic* approaches employ a more bottom-up perspective and concentrate on analysing the existing characteristics of an organisation to construct an understanding of its culture. In this approach, culture is something to be observed, rather than created or defined. The third approach moves the focus to *disciplinary frameworks*, on the basis that cultures in educational organisations can sometimes be better understood through an analysis at this level. The work of Silver (2003) is relevant here, as he argues that universities should not be understood as 'total institutions', but comprise

a range of cultures, with the discipline providing the reference point for most staff. Finally, the *multiple cultural configurations approach* (Alvesson, 1993, 2002) sees cultures as natural and dynamic. Culture should be understood '...not as unitary wholes… but as mixtures of cultural manifestations of different levels and kinds'. (Alvesson, 1993, p.118). In this paper, it is argued that Alvesson's approach provides the most valuable one for understanding the presence and dynamics of culture in higher education institutions. However, at this stage, the main point to be made is that there are various different 'lenses' through which we can view culture, in order to gain a fuller appreciation of it. When we start to consider these other approaches, we can appreciate that culture is a rather more sophisticated notion than it is often presented to be, and that this has implications for our application of it to the higher education sector.

For the interested party, there are plenty of other studies which address or have relevance to culture in the higher education context. Kezar & Eckel (2002) explored the relationship between culture and change in their study of six universities in Amercia. Tierney (1987) found that semiotics represent a key theme in understanding culture of the organisation. Her work applied an idiographic approach and was undertaken in the context of a small Catholic liberal arts college during a period of institutional crisis, and whilst under new leadership. Finally, Silver (2003) argues that there are difficulties associated with understanding organisational culture in an academic context, suggesting that universities do not feature a unitary culture, but are better understood as featuring a collection of groups, all with their own facets of academic and professional behaviour. Of course, others might disagree: it could be suggested that universities feature an institutional level culture *and* a whole series of cultures within. This moves us back towards the work of Alvesson, which is revisited in the section below.

Multiple cultural configurations

The work of Alvesson (1993, 2002, 2008) has been influential in adding to our understanding of culture, and is the approach adopted to support the argument put forward in this work. By way of reminder, it is argued here that Alvesson's (1993, 2002) notion of multiple cultural configurations fused with the meso theory of educational change (Trowler, 2005, 2008) provide more relevant approaches for informing educational change initiatives. Alvesson's notion of multiple cultural configurations defines cultures as open, interactive and dynamic, featuring multi-directional flows of 'cultural traffic' at all levels of the organisation. This view steers us away from interpreting universities as 'total institutions' (Silver, 2003), drawing attention to a multiplicity of cross-cutting cultures in the organisation. Whilst an organisation might 'have a culture', it also comprises a range of different, overlapping, dynamic cultures within.

Approaches to culture change

As with the notion of culture itself, there exists a rich literature on culture change and organisational change. Such terms are often used interchangeably, but there is a

subtle difference between the two. For example, culture change may be considered to represent one type of organisational change (Smith, 2003) or a factor that may trigger its occurrence (Dawson, 1994). Nevertheless, it can be difficult to disentangle the two concepts from one another.

Lewin (1947, 1952) provided an early model of change that formed part of his wider analysis of social change and equilibria. For Lewin, change involves direction '…toward a higher level of group performance…' (1947, p. 34) and may be orchestrated by way of a three stage process: unfreezing, moving and refreezing of group standards. More recently, however, it is the technical rationalist approach and its variants that have provided the dominant force in change initiatives. Technical rationalism is a centralised, top-down approach to change, characteristic of what Sadler-Smith & Smith (2006, p. 271) refer to as '…the plan-do-check cycle of the systematic approach' which works '…under tightly structured conditions of predictability, control and stability'. Schon (1983, p. 21) defined it as '…instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique'. Technical rationalism is further discussed and its virtues elaborated in sources including Buckley & Caple (1992) and Patrick (1992), whilst an analysis and critique can be found in Gore, Bond & Steven (2000). Yet whilst representing a popular model in higher education, it has been subject to considerable criticism. Sadler-Smith & Smith (2006) add that technical rationalism is both behaviourist and reductionist, overlooking the value of incidental learning and the 'messiness' of everyday practice. Alvesson (2002) describes it as 'pop management' and lists 'seven sins' that it encompasses. Other writers, in a range of disciplines, have also been critical (Senge, 1990; Rhoades, 2000). The existing situation is summarised helpfully by Ogbonna & Harris (2002) who explain that there is a gap between academic theories which are critical of the idea of technical rationalist approaches, and the actions of practitioners in the sector who regularly engage in planned interventions using this approach.

There are, of course, other approaches that may be drawn upon to inform culture change initiatives, although these perspectives are not all trying to achieve or advise about the same aspects of change. Kogan (2001) interprets change as a political enterprise and his analysis focuses on the role of different groups in policy making and implementation. He also identifies factors that may induce change. Fullan examines a number of different issues for understanding and guiding change, writing of change as a journey in which organisations need to be understood as living systems (Fullan, 1999), the importance of complexity and diversity when developing change processes for educational environments (Fullan, 1999, 2003) and the relationship between organisational change and leadership principles (Fullan, 2007). However, these contributions are often practice based (Trowler, 2005) and do not sufficiently account for the different interests, activities and cultures of the various work-groups involved in, or affected by change. Instead, there is often a focus on change as something that can take place by progression through a number of steps. Whilst the varied writings of Fullan and others are valuable for guiding the implementation of new innovations, it is suggested here that alternative social practice based approaches provide more theoretical leverage in enabling us to understand and analyse processes and outcomes of change. In this capacity, Elton

(1999) argues how change can be achieved in the context of the teaching function of universities, and draws on established sociological theory in developing his argument. Following on from an analysis of change initiatives that did not work, he presents a ten part strategy for consideration by change agents for successful change. Elton concludes:

> The most important lesson to be learned from an analysis of successful change in higher education is that it involves – at different times and in different ways – everyone who either wants to achieve change, is affected by the change or has some power over the change, i.e. everyone, but not everyone at the same time or in the same way. (Elton, 1999, p. 223).

Ashwin (2002) was guided by Elton's work in his successful reworking of a peer learning scheme in a large further education college, shifting it away from one shaped by technical rationalism to one which involved teachers and students who were affected by the introduction of the scheme. Thus, in larger scale educational initiatives, it seems reasonable to suggest that different issues, benefits, concerns or results may occur for particular communities or individuals. In such cases, Social Practice Theory – which takes greater account of diverse social practices of all the parties involved - has a great deal to offer. Bamber, Trowler, Saunders & Knight (2009) add:

> Where 'enhancement' is imposed by managers' power, with no accommodation of contextual factors, there is unlikely to be real change in values, attitudes or practices in the long term. Effective change is embedded in its context and comes when those involved make it their own through use and adaptation to local histories and contexts. (Bamber et al., 2009, p. 2).

The next section introduces the meso approach for educational change, which has its roots in Social Practice Theory.

The meso theory of educational change

Trowler's (2005, 2008) meso framework for understanding and informing change processes within the educational context is the second theoretical tool used to support the main argument put forward in this paper. Trowler's starting point is that much of our knowledge of teaching and learning is derived from research at the micro (psychological) or macro (sociological) levels, such that there is a need to focus more at the meso level – teaching, learning and educational change schemes in local contexts, such as the programme, department, or work-group. He uses the conceptual device of Teaching and Learning Regimes (TLRs), which itself is based in Social Practice Theory (Trowler, 2005; Trowler & Cooper, 2002) to provide insights into meso level dimensions in universities.

> The significant contribution that the study of TLRs can offer to our understanding (and the practice of) change is the fact that they act as 'filters', conditioning the reception and implementation of change, as well as generating their own changes or acting as a brake on it. (Trowler, 2005, p. 26).

TLRs involve a 'constellation of moments', defined as 'dimensions of culture' (Trowler, 2005, p. 23), and which are interlaced in social practices. There are eight such moments, examples of which include attribution of meanings, codes of

signification, discursive repertoires, recurrent practices, and the presence of power relations. These provide an access point to the meso level approach, some recent examples being provided in Trowler (2008) – who also provides guidance on implementation of the meso approach. In reality, such moments operate as a collective, interweaving with one another within the specific context. Such an approach might also be more fitting and realistic in a large complex, organisation, such as a university, characterised by what Weik (1976, p. 6) refers to as 'loosely coupled systems'.

An integrated approach to culture and culture change in a higher education context

During this literature review, the concepts of culture and culture change have been explored and a number of approaches and theories have been discussed. It has been argued that Alvesson's (1993, 2002) notion of multiple cultural configurations, fused with Trowler's (2005, 2008) meso theory of educational change provide better theoretical tools for guiding change initiatives in higher educational institutions, as compared with technical rationalist approaches and, for that matter, the more system based change management approaches. But why? This section will further elucidate on the argument.

The discussion and review of literature provided above raises questions about the suitability of technical rationalist approaches as the *dominant* informant for educational change initiatives. As indicated by Smith and Sadler Smith (2006), whilst these approaches may provide a starting point for the change agent, they obscure local issues and practices. Technical rationalist, rational purposive and related approaches tend to provide limited consideration of the different workgroups who are involved in or affected by the change, deploying a 'black box' approach – akin to the behaviourist theory of learning. Fullan's work offers some recognition of such complexities (Fullan, 1999, 2003), but still does not satisfactorily address local practices. The approach advocated here invites those who lead change initiatives to recognise and account for all the work-groups affected by such change from the start. By taking account of diversities in work-group practices (Trowler, 2005, 2008) and cultures (Alvesson, 1993, 2002) from the planning stage onwards, policy makers and change agents can gain fuller understanding of environments that they are seeking to affect change upon, such that more genuine culture change might be achievable. Further, theories by Trowler and Alvesson are more useful for informing contemporary educational change, because they account for educational institutions *as they are now*: large, diverse, plural, complex.

For the change agent, additional recommendations may be made. First, where a culture change represents an aim of an initiative, it may be useful to provide a more detailed explication of what that culture change is and what it is aiming towards. This way, both implementers and recipients may be able to take better account of it in their actions. Second, if we accept that there are differences within universities, for example, with respect to how different departments, schools, faculties, sections and other work-groups exist and function, it would be valuable to apply the meso

perspective at the planning stages, as opposed to assuming a systematic or 'one size fits all' approach, as is a common characteristic and major limitation of the technical rationalist approach.

Of course, it needs to be recognised that there are limitations with the meso theory too. For example, it is suggested here that it may be difficult to apply the meso theory as the only approach for informing a change initiative, in complete isolation from other approaches; some aspects of change may need to be handled at a central level. Thus, universities must take seriously the important work of policy making units and committees, such that adoption of a meso approach requires that their roles and expertise is accounted for at the outset. What is advocated here is that this should take place through a fore-grounding of the meso approach at all stages: creation, design, implementation, evaluation and follow up, such that our dominant theoretical precursor or guide to change is at the meso level itself.

In the current climate of government cuts, rocketing student tuition fees, and more general 'chronic uncertainty' (Saunders, 2006), we may need to revisit what a university culture is or what university cultures are. But for now, there is a lot of merit in the meso.

Closing comments

In light of this discussion, and accounting particularly for the theoretical models of Alvesson (1993, 2002) and Trowler (2005, 2008) it has been argued that in large, diverse university structures, the meso level should be brought to the foreground in designing and implementing culture change initiatives. This involves taking greater account of more local level issues, practices and multiple configurations of cultures. In essence, Trowler's view of educational change and Alvesson's perspective on organisational cultures may be blended together to provide a more dynamic view of culture change, better suited to a multi-faceted educational institution than a 'one size fits all' technical rationalist approach. Further, culture is presented here as a *plural* concept, as opposed to 'some thing' which can be singularly created or changed. Technical rationalist approaches are of a different age and for an outdated type of university. That is why most of the literature is consistent in suggesting these approaches no longer characterise the anatomy and operation of the contemporary higher education institution.

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