

Theorising school level cultures of teaching and learning in higher education: Responses to a self-evaluation intervention

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1. Introduction

The context for this research is a particular institutional response to the Higher Education Quality Committee's (HEQC) Programme Accreditation Framework, which requires that institutions demonstrate that their internal procedures for the quality assurance of programmes are sufficient for them to be granted programme accreditation status. The Quality Promotion Unit (QPU), together with the institution in this study, has adopted a developmental approach to quality and has resisted technocratic and bureaucratic approaches that do not make a significant contribution to quality improvement.

This paper draws on social practice theories as an appropriate theoretical framework for this developmental approach to quality. Essentially, social practice theories understand policy implementation as a process of organisational learning in specific contexts. However, the application of social practice theories to changes in higher education is limited. This paper focuses primarily on the question of how we understand these contexts in higher education institutions. This research project addresses two questions:

1. What is the nature of programme and School level cultures of teaching and learning?
2. What influence do these local level cultures have on the reception of this particular quality intervention?

One might ask what is the relevance of these research questions to a conference on action research. Taken as a whole, this particular quality intervention could be understood as an action research intervention. However, rather than focusing the research on the whole action research cycle, it has picked up on one particular part of the action research cycle, namely to interrogate the theoretical underpinnings of the process of reflection on an intervention. This seems to me to be an essential and problematic part of applying an action research methodology, since reflection is heavily dependent on the tacit or explicit theories underpinning that reflection.

In higher education this is particularly significant since there is some debate about whether organisational cultures in higher education are essentially defined by the epistemological characteristics of the various disciplines (Becher, 1989, Neumann, 2002, Kekale, 2002), a position that is challenged by Trowler (1999, 2002, 2003), who, drawing on social practice theories, argues that cultures in higher education are defined less by the epistemological characteristics of the different disciplines than by locally situated disciplinary narratives, which are influenced by a wide range of factors both internal and external to the institution. Trowler has begun a process of developing an alternative framework for conceptualising organisational culture in higher education, which is applied in this study to see how useful it is in shedding light on the institutional cultures in which policy is received and responded to.

How we understand the nature of the organisational cultures through which a particular policy is received and responded to thus becomes an important question both theoretically and in our practice as change agents in higher education, since the tools we use to reflect on institutional cultures will influence the ways in which we shape policy interventions and interpret their reception.

2. The study

This study is based on an analysis of the discussion at a workshop organised in collaboration with a particular faculty that volunteered to pilot the self-evaluation toolbox developed by the QPU at the institution in this study.

The idea of a self evaluation toolbox was developed by the QPU as a response to the HEQC Programme Accreditation Framework, that would draw out its developmental potential, while also satisfying HEQC requirements for the quality assurance of programmes at an institutional level.

The HEQC in its current structural form emerged out of debates around the relationship between the State and higher education institutions in the transformation of higher education, in the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) and White Paper 3 on the Transformation of Higher Education and Training (1997). After considerable debate the national policy framework for the transformation of higher education was adopted, based on the concept of partnership between the State, higher education institutions and other stakeholders. The Council for Higher Education (CHE) was established as an independent body with considerable powers to provide a 'zone of negotiation' between the State, higher education institutions and stakeholders. It was given the responsibility for overseeing quality because it was recognised that this was a joint responsibility of the State and higher education institutions. However, recently the HEQC appears to have shifted towards a more bureaucratic state control approach to quality assurance, as has been seen in the recent MBA intervention, where the HEQC on the direction of the Minister of Education, has assumed direct responsibility for the quality assurance of MBA programmes. It is not yet clear whether this was a one-off intervention based on particular concerns about the proliferation of MBAs by fly-by-night providers, or whether it represents a more general change in the emphasis of relations between the State and higher education institutions as mediated by the HEQC.

This paper is based on the premise that social practice theories provide a better model for implementing the cooperative governance approach to transforming higher education than the more bureaucratic, technicist and top-down approaches to national policy implementation that have a tendency to emerge in practice.

Some work has already been done in the UK to apply social practice theories to higher education policy implementation (Trowler and Knight, 2001). This has focused on the importance of middle level leaders and communities of practice in shaping the implementation of policies in particular localised contexts.

This social practice approach to policy implementation provided the theoretical premise for the self-evaluation toolbox. While annual self-evaluation by programmes and Schools will be compulsory, ownership and responsibility for this will rest with Directors of Programmes and Heads of Schools. The toolbox provides a framework for self evaluation, but Directors of Programmes and Heads of Schools are encouraged not to see it as a blueprint, but to adapt it to their own contexts, while being encouraged to draw on the QPU as a resource to support their self evaluation initiatives. All that is required in terms of institutional accountability is that Schools submit a short report to the Faculty Dean to be discussed by the Faculty Board, which must give feedback to the School.

The self-evaluation project is still in the early stages of implementation. The policy has been informally accepted and is being introduced to Heads of Schools. It has been piloted in one faculty, and this paper uses that self-evaluation workshop as a case study in trying out the theoretical framework adopted in this study.

The Faculty analysed in this study is a strongly defined professional discipline. In the context of institutional merger, the workshop brought together academics from three Schools across three campuses and two institutions. The primary purpose of the workshop was to contribute to the restructuring process and the development of a single disciplinary Faculty for the new institution. The study thus foregrounds the similarities and differences in a single discipline across different social contexts.

3. Social practice theory

A social practice approach to implementing policy would understand it as a process of organisational learning through localized communities of practice. It draws on constructivist theories of learning. As Lave (1993) says: “theories of situated everyday practice insist that persons acting and the social world of activity cannot be separated.” (Lave: 5) Organisational learning is defined as a social process, of learning what to do in a complex web of relationships according to specific rules and routines, using specific tools.

There are two main strands in social practice theory: activity theory and social practice theory.

Activity theory has its roots in Vygotsky’s Marxist influenced approach to learning. More recently, Engestrom (1993) has developed activity theory approaches to understanding organisational change. He describes activity theory as based on three premises:

1. That contexts are socially constructed and can be analysed by looking at the relationship between an individual subject, the community of practice in which they participate and the object of activity in which they are engaged.
2. That activities should be understood in their historical context. He draws on Marx's materialist conception of history, relating historical change to changes in the mode of production, or activity.
3. Following Marx's dialectic, that the inner contradictions of activity systems are the primary source of change.

Communities of practice theory has been developed by Lave (1993), Gerhardt et al (1998), and Seely-Brown and Duguid (1996), among others. These theorists emphasise the importance of 'communities of practice' in organisational learning. These are defined as " a set of relations among persons activity and the world over time and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (Gerhardt: 277). Communities of practice are defined by shared norms and values and are linked to the notion of social identities.

Social practice theories have some theoretical limitations, in particular the failure to deal adequately with the relationship between structure and agency in communities of practice. At times this has led to an over-agentic view of communities of practice in which structural constraints are underplayed (Lave, 1993, Gerhardt, 1998). Conversely, community of practice theorists have underplayed the tension between agency and structure, and have adopted a somewhat functionalist approach to the role of communities of practice in organisational change, assuming that individual agency and the directions of communities of practice will unproblematically support organisational goals (Seely-Brown and Duguid, 1996). There is a tendency to assume intersubjectivity within communities of practice, and to underemphasize diversity and difference (Gerhardt, 1996).

In his recent work applying social practice theories to understanding organisational culture in higher education, Trowler (1999, 2002, 2003) addresses these theoretical limitations. Drawing on developments in sociological theory and cultural studies Trowler brings greater theoretical sophistication to social practice theory, drawing on Giddensian structuration theory (1984), with its emphasis on the knowledgeability of social agents, as well as post modern theories of discourse, power, agency and social identity.

Trowler has defined eight categories for analysing meso level cultures of teaching and learning (Trowler and Cooper, 2003). These are still relatively untheorised, and there is little empirical research into what they look like when applied. This study analyses the first School level self evaluation workshop using Trowler's eight categories of teaching and learning regimes to see how useful they are when applied in practice in shedding light on the 'communities of practice' or activity systems within higher education institutions.

4. Analysing the workshop discussion using Trowler's categories of teaching and learning regimes

4.1 Identities in interaction

Trowler describes these as relational and fluid, and often unconscious. He says these are adjusted to accommodate differences in organisational culture.

The analysis in this section focuses on the way in which academics from the different Schools described their strengths and values, and looks at the value of exploring the expression of identities in action across the organisational cultures of the different Schools. Academics from School 1 and School 2 belonged to a single Faculty across two campuses, and had similar things to say about the identity of their School. Academics spoke of a strong reputation, both in the academic and professional community that had been built up over many years. This reputation was built around a commitment to human rights and community service, as well as to producing top quality graduates. They were particularly proud of the number of graduates of colour serving in prestigious national positions, as well as the number of scholarships awarded to their students. The Dean of the Faculty also remarked on “a certain ethos and spirit among staff”: while academics generally have a reputation for individualism, he commented on how well staff got on with each other, with all staff prepared to get involved in committee work, pointing to the high turnout at the workshop.

Academics from School 3 painted a very different picture of their identity as a School. One academic claimed they had a “reputation problem”, and had “always been the Cinderella institution” with little control over access, which meant they “always had students who were difficult to teach as well as large student numbers”. Another academic took a more optimistic view, saying their aim had been to become as good or better than similar Schools in other institutions by looking at other Schools’ benchmarks. He said they “took a pragmatic approach to turning the place around” looking at whether students were getting “value for money” and whether staff were working hard enough.

Trowler argues that disciplinary identities are not so much defined by the epistemological structure of the discipline, but by disciplinary narratives. The workshop drew out two quite distinct disciplinary identities across the three Schools, which appeared to be linked to broader institutional differences.

This study appears to support the view that School level cultures are not defined simply by the epistemological characteristics of the discipline, but are developed as historical and locally situated disciplinary narratives, as can be seen in the stories of the three Schools related above.

The focus of this workshop on getting academics to explore disciplinary narratives across the Schools involved in the merger appeared to provide a much more constructive process than much of the merger discussions at an institutional level, where discussions have often been acrimonious, and have tended towards generalised and unspecific narratives of historical disadvantage. Trowler argues that identities in interaction are fluid, and can be adjusted to accommodate different organisational contexts. Discussions at the level of the three Schools provided scope for developing a shared vision and also opened up academics to some new and

potentially beneficial identities offered by the merger. For academics from School 3 the merger potentially provides some tangible benefits, such as shedding the 'reputation problem', while gaining the advantages of belonging to a high status Faculty in a better serviced institution. Some of the values were shared across the institutions, for example a commitment to teaching and learning, while others that were not explicitly stated by School 3 appeared to be welcomed, for example the community focus and the commitment to human rights.

However, it would be dangerous to assume a simple narrative structure in these complex relationships between the Schools, since there are likely to be multiple and contradictory narratives that are mobilized differently in different contexts. As was pointed out in the criticism of social practice theories, there is a danger in assuming a unitary or shared identity within communities of practice. In terms of the workshop, this calls for caution in assuming that those confident to speak in the public forum of the workshop represent the complex positionings of all academics within the communities of practice brought together at the workshop. It is important to be open to the silences in participation, and to the potential for marginal voices that may not speak openly in a workshop context.

The workshop itself created a context in which some of the more positive and least potentially divisive expressions of identity could be shared. The intention of the Faculty was that the workshop would contribute to building a shared consensus, rather than to encourage differences between the Schools. Perhaps in the process some of the doubts, anxieties and marginal perspectives of academics in the various Schools were not aired. Informal conversations with an academic from School 1 pointed to considerable anxieties among some academics from School 3, in particular among contract staff that would lose their jobs, and others who might feel intimidated by the high academic standards set by Schools 1 and 2. The Head of School in another discipline of the institution spoke of the difficulties in managing the complex racial sensitivities that crept into discussions about maintaining academic standards in the merger process. In addition to issues of race, the merger also raises the question of institutional disadvantage with a merger between a historically white institution and a historically black institution.

However, while the workshop did not explicitly deal with questions of race and institutional disadvantage, it did provide a broad set of values and practices that appeared to manage these issues in a way that was sensitive to those involved. By stressing a shared purpose, and by building on the principles of individual human rights embedded in the narrative tradition of the discipline in these Schools, these complex and potentially divisive issues were defused. Informal discussion over tea at the workshop with a black academic from School 3 indicated that some of the sensitivities around institutional disadvantage in the merger process had been well handled. He said that there had been considerable anxiety at the outset of the merger talks that as the smaller School they would be outvoted on every issue. He had been pleasantly surprised when at the first meeting academics from one of the other Schools had voted against a proposal by their own Head. This reassured the academic that issues would be addressed on their individual merits rather than on the basis of institutional caucusing, and since then he had felt comfortable participating in the merger process. For this academic the opportunity to be treated

on his individual merits rather than on the basis of individual or institutional disadvantage was welcomed.

When younger and new academics were asked in the workshop about their satisfaction with induction processes, a number of them spoke positively about the degree of openness, helpfulness and collaboration among staff, as well as the expectation that they would participate fully in the work of the School. This appeared to have developed a culture of inclusivity such that race and institutional disadvantage did not surface as corrosive issues at the workshop.

While the workshop provided an interesting starting point from which to explore some of the issues of identity in interaction, much of the above analysis remains speculative. However, it is important to bear in mind that the workshop forum had a particular bias in the way it allowed for the articulation of identities in interaction. A more in-depth study of the three Schools over time could shed more light on the way in which identities in interaction develop and change across the communities of practice of these particular Schools.

4.2 Discursive Repertoires

Trowler (2003) draws on post-modern theories in identifying this category of teaching and learning regimes. An order of discourse has particular ways of representing the world and associated discursive repertoires. Trowler (2003) gives as an example the discourses of the New Higher Education, which he says mobilises discourses associated with finance, the delivery of learning outcomes, audit and customer focus.

This section extends the analysis of school identities, above, by locating identities within discourses and discursive repertoires. Post-modern theories of identity argue that people adopt subject positions within discourses as a means for exercising agency within a particular discourse. While there is some scope for agency, there are also limits to the subject positions available within a given order of discourse. This can be seen in the way the academic from School 3 positions himself, claiming an identity for the School through the discursive repertoires associated with the New Higher Education of 'benchmarks', 'value for money' and academic accountability. Academics from Schools 1 and 2 drew on a much wider range of discursive repertoires drawn from a range of discourses. This could be because Schools 1 and 2 have developed their identities over a long period of time. While NHE discourses have become more prevalent since 1994 with the shift of the ANC from national liberation movement into the State structures, and with the growing dominance of neo-liberal discourses globally, the identities of Schools 1 and 2 were already strongly developed by this time. These two Schools had grown from an early liberal identity, which paved the way for a strong human rights culture, and the positioning of the Faculty in relation to the broader struggle against apartheid. This developed side by side with an identity of academic excellence, which in the context of responsiveness to the challenges posed by apartheid developed into a commitment to providing an appropriate education and training for black students. For academics in School 3, committed to building the reputation of the School in the post 1994 period, the discursive repertoires associated with the New Higher Education have become more pervasive, leaving academics at School 3 more vulnerable to "capture

by the discourse” (Trowler, 2001) of NHE than Schools 1 and 2, with their broader historical range of discourses and associated discursive repertoires to build on.

4.3 Power relations

The third category identified by Trowler’s teaching and learning regimes is power relations. This involves the operation and flow of power and patterns of power relations within teaching and learning regimes. Changes in power relations are also linked to threats to identity. Power relations are often invisible until challenged by interventions. In teaching and learning regimes a key focus of power relations is on the relation between academics and students.

In relation to this study, the self-evaluation workshop foregrounded the importance of student feedback as a key source of information to be considered in the evaluation of teaching and learning. There was considerable discussion at the workshop about the value of student feedback and on the different forms it should take. While student evaluations are voluntary at the institution to which Schools 1 and 2 belong, the Faculty has taken a decision that student evaluations are compulsory for all modules. This demonstrates a Faculty-wide recognition of the value of student feedback, which is linked to a broader commitment to teaching and learning. However, there was not a complete consensus amongst academics on this issue. One academic from School 1 questioned the value of student evaluations, arguing that students give positive evaluations to lecturers that give them good marks. Another academic from School 1 took the opposite position, questioning why some academics were so sensitive about student evaluation, arguing that student evaluation was taking place across the country, and that academics should take students seriously. Interestingly, this academic linked student evaluation to performance evaluation of academics, arguing that both were now part and parcel of academic life. This reveals that student evaluation is located within broader discursive debates of academic accountability versus academic freedom.

The discussion around performance evaluation for academics also aroused considerable debate, with an academic from School 2 taking a strong stand against performance evaluation, arguing that it was “not the responsibility of the Head of School to hold everyone’s hand, that academics needed to use initiative and drive, and that if they didn’t have this they shouldn’t be in the job”. This was countered by an academic from School 1, who argued that “when individual academics failed it sent ripples through the Faculty”. In this situation, he argued, the Head of School “had a responsibility to give academics a prod and stir them out of their lethargy”.

What these various responses demonstrate is the way in which academics’ perception of their identity as academics influences the way in which they respond to student evaluation and performance evaluation. This suggests that power is not fixed, but is relational, and depends to some extent on the subject positions academics assume within the flow of power relations. For academics who assumed an identity linked to notions of academic autonomy and individualism, student evaluations and performance evaluation posed a bigger threat to their identity than academics that positioned themselves differently in relation to students and other staff. Shifts in the social identities assumed by academics can thus lead to shifting positions in relation to power relations between academics and students. While this

argument should not be pushed to the extent of denying the structural force of power relations, it does point to the fluidity of power relations, and the potential for a degree of agency by academics in choosing a subject position from which to negotiate power relations in teaching and learning regimes.

4.4 Implicit theories of teaching and learning

Trowler and Cooper (2003) argue that implicit theories of teaching and learning can have a considerable impact on the way in which education development interventions are received. The main trajectories of teaching and learning theories identified by Trowler and Cooper are between transmissive/authoritarian and constructivist/democratic theories of teaching and learning.

This provides another interesting angle to the academic freedom/accountability debates in which accountability could be linked to more constructivist/democratic theories of teaching and learning, while academic freedom could be linked to transmissive/ authoritarian theories of teaching and learning. However, the interplay between these different discourses is by no means simple, and accountability debates have often been linked to invasive and bureaucratic approaches to teaching and learning.

In this particular study, some of the academics who were most vocal in their resistance to student evaluations and performance appraisal were the ones who were least committed to the workshop process. Trowler and Cooper (2003) found that academics who responded most positively to staff development courses were those whose theories of teaching and learning were closest to those of the education development staff running the courses, while those who benefited least were those whose theories of teaching and learning were most opposed to those of the course coordinators.

This particular self evaluation intervention is based on a constructivist approach to teaching and learning in which students' active engagement in the teaching and learning process is valued and encouraged. Academics who do not share the values underlying the self-evaluation workshop are likely to be resistant, non-cooperative and silent. This raises the question of whether self-evaluation workshops will be a successful intervention in programmes and Schools that do not share the theoretical perspective of the QPU.

For some academics there may be resistance to the constructivist theoretical underpinnings of the workshop, while for others there may be perceptions of quality as an invasion of academic autonomy. The QPU as a whole has been careful in the way it has positioned itself in relation to the academic freedom/ accountability debates, and has resisted being positioned as the institutional watchdog of quality assurance. At the same time the fluid nature of discourses of teaching and learning implies that there is likely to be some common ground to be found with many academics that may not identify with what they take to be the theoretical/ideological underpinnings of the self-evaluation workshops.

Sensitivity to the potential for differences in implicit theories of learning and teaching may make it possible for academics from the QPU to negotiate and adapt workshops

to accommodate and/or engage with dominant theories of teaching and learning in different School contexts.

4.5 Codes of signification

Trowler and Cooper (2003) identify this category of teaching and learning regimes as the attribution of meaning and emotion to signs, that are linked to power, status and the interest attached to signs. In teaching and learning regimes these are commonly found in the value of research over teaching and administration.

In this study the workshop took up this debate in the discussion around workloads, and moves at an institutional level to free up productive researchers from teaching and administrative tasks in order for them to be able to concentrate on research. The Dean attempted at the workshop to make this more palatable to less productive researchers by arguing that teaching and administration were also valuable to the Faculty. However, this was quickly rebutted by academic staff, which pointed out that research, and not teaching or administration is linked to promotion and academic status.

However, self evaluation can play a role in shifting the codes of signification, for example by valuing quality teaching and providing a platform for committed educationists to carry out research into teaching and learning and present these findings at the workshop, thus linking teaching more closely with higher status research codes of signification. The Faculty has also played a role in shifting the value attached to teaching and administration. Academics are expected to serve on two committees, and these committees are given considerable decision-making power, so administrative responsibility is seen as a route to empowerment, as well as a means of socialising academics into the community of practice of the School and Faculty.

However, codes of signification are also influenced by forces external to the institution. Prior to 1994, issues of access, teaching and learning occupied the moral high ground. Recently though, shifts in national higher education policy have privileged research institutions, so codes of signification are changing, with a loss of status by institutions that have emphasised teaching and the transformation of organisational structures at the expense of research.

4.6 Tacit assumptions

Trowler identifies these as taken for granted assumptions in teaching and learning regimes, for example about the nature of students in higher education and what is relevant in teaching and learning.

The study identified tacit assumptions around the expectations of students in a higher status professional discipline that informed the responses of academics to student complaints about the heavy workloads. Discussion at the workshop in response to this complaint by students was based on the premise that levels of work were non-negotiable. Discussion focused on the possibility of equalizing workloads across modules in the programme and spreading the workload more evenly across the semester, but the heavy workloads were seen as something that students would

have to adapt to as part of their entry into the 'community of practice' of the profession.

4.7 Rules of appropriateness

Trowler argues that these are often tacit, for example patterns of classroom interaction, assessment strategies and student involvement.

They are closely associated with:

4.8 Recurrent practices

Trowler describes these as unreflective habitual routines.

The self-evaluation workshop provided a forum for making tacit rules and practices explicit, for discussing practices across institutional boundaries, and for developing new common practices for the merged institution.

Discussion around assessment practices provided a forum for discussion of common practices and assumptions. For example: An academic in School 1 identified the practice of rigorous scrutiny of exam papers by at least two peers. He argued that this system worked well because academics "knew each other well, so accepted robust criticism". He pointed out that it required "a level of maturity for the system to work well and honestly". Since one of the intentions of the workshop was to facilitate the proposed integration of Schools 1 and 3, this process of making tacit practices explicit created the basis for taking this practice of "robust criticism" into the new relations between academics in the new School.

5. Conclusions

The application of Trowler's categories of teaching and learning regimes to the study demonstrated the potentially rich field of theoretical enquiry it might open up in studies of institutional cultures in higher education. Trowler's categories of teaching and learning regimes provided a valuable tool for the analysis of the workshop, bringing to the fore the significance of social identities and their links to discourse and power relations, a theoretical field that has provided a rich source in sociological and cultural studies, but that has not been fully developed in higher education studies.

While the separating out of the eight categories proved useful in organising the analytical framework for the study, in practice the categories overlapped and added weight to each other when applied to single incidents. The study foregrounded the need to develop the theoretical basis for Trowler's categories of teaching and learning regimes, and for exploring the links between the different categories.

The study also demonstrated how an awareness of the play of social identity, discourses and power, and the way these were mobilised in the workshop, could assist staff involved in their reflections on the reception of the change intervention, and in planning further self evaluation workshops.

At the same time the analysis highlighted the shifting and fluid nature of teaching and learning regimes, and the need to recognise the way in which the workshop mobilised a particular expression of these. This serves as a caution to making assumptions about the teaching and learning regimes of the three Schools concerned from a single workshop. In many respects the analysis of the workshop raised more questions about the nature of teaching and learning regimes across the three Schools than it was able to answer, pointing to the potential value of a more in-depth study of these Schools across time as they work their way through the complex issues raised by institutional merger.

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