

# Large Scale University Curriculum Change: from Practice to Theory (and back again).

(Think piece)

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## Introduction

This talk offers to leaders involved in the sustainable university initiative some tools for thinking and then acting in ways which help increase the chances of effective and sustained curriculum change. My focus here is on strategic, large-scale changes in teaching and learning and the curriculum. By 'leaders' I don't just mean the top teams of universities<sup>1</sup>, but essentially anyone involved in initiating or carrying through innovations (Knight and Trowler, 2001). Innovation in this area is a challenge for leaders. Common experiences include the following:

- Internal embedded practices act and interact to erode reform
- Structural processes are slow and internally contradictory: there is no institutional 'learning architecture' (Dill, 1999; Nelles and Vorley, 2010) and so structures are not fully joined-up
- Decision-making, review and accountability processes are also non-aligned
- There is patchiness in delivery of core activities
- Prioritisation doesn't happen, so that goals are multiple, unrealistic and frequently changing
- There are unformed, inappropriate and changing implementation strategies and tactics
- There is lots of talk, but little action, lots of strategic discussion, but business as usual
- There is often defence of 'turf' and fear of change

For leaders of change this can lead to some very common experiences:

- Only the 'usual suspects' are engaged with the reform, others quietly withdraw or actively oppose change
- There is slow acceleration to a plateau and then entropy sets in
- Turf wars and other squabbles result in stalled initiatives
- There are difficulties in scaling up and the short-termism of 'projectitis': reform stopping as funding ends

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware, of course, that higher education happens outside institutions that happen to be called universities: I use that term only for reasons of style and concision.

Just painting this picture is draining and can risk imbuing us with a sense of fatalism. No wonder middle- and ground-level leaders<sup>2</sup> use analogies about change such as: 'working with a dysfunctional family'; 'wading through a quagmire of bureaucracy'; 'trying to drive a nail into a wall of blancmange - little resistance but no result'; 'being a one-armed paper-hanger working in a gale'. (Fullan and Scott, 2009, pp 107-8).

But we should not be too depressed. It is entirely possible to bring about large-scale institutional change, as I showed in my study of the credit framework (1998), as Louis Elton (1992) describes in his commentary on Problem-Based Learning and other initiatives, and as the case study contributors recount in our recent book *Enhancing Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Curriculum in Higher Education* show (Bamber et al, 2009).

## Frameworks for Action

A social practice perspective to change, which emphasizes understanding already existing practices on the ground, is very valuable for bringing about effective change processes. Fuller concurs:

One of the basic reasons why planning fails is that planners or decision makers of change are unaware of the situations faced by potential implementers...they introduce change...without attempting to understand the values, ideas and experiences of those who essential for implementing change. (Fuller, 2007, p 110)

On its own this theoretical tradition is not particularly helpful for change agents however. Integrating that theoretical approach into action-focused frameworks is necessary. These *frameworks for action* are conceptually-based lenses offered to leaders to help them act in a more informed and theoretically illuminated way (See Bamber, Trowler, Saunders and Knight, 2009, for more examples). They aim to get beyond the usual kinds of advice that textbooks and articles usually give: these are often devoid of explicit theory, are conceptually malnourished and are not usually connected to the daily reality of those in HE. Often such advice consists of little more than truisms that fail the 'Reversal Test' - if you reverse them, they say nothing beyond the obvious. Fullan and Scott, 2009, for example, tell leaders they should 'Listen, Link and Lead', that they should be decisive, committed and empathizing. Reversing that advice for guidance on what *not* to do sounds ridiculous.

Frameworks for action have four elements: data from practice on the ground; theory; associated concepts; and finally reflective questions for leaders. Data inform and refine theory; theory and data interact with each other: theory shapes the interpretation of data. Meanwhile concepts are crystallised out of that interaction and themselves are applied to the situation on the ground. Finally, reflective questions are formulated on the basis of those processes. I won't say much about data in this think piece.

In shaping frameworks for action in this case I have already indicated that social practice theory offers helpful insights for the project you are engaged in. Social practices are recurrent behaviours found in social contexts which are underpinned by regularities in terms of meaning, emotions and evoked responses. Drawing on a number of theorists (eg

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly senior leaders such as provost and dean have much more positive analogies: 'conducting an orchestra'; 'climbing a mountain together'; 'coaching a successful sports team'.

Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Schatzki et al, 2001; Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005) we can identify the key characteristics of a social practice approach to understanding universities and change as follows:

1. People are carriers of practices: they enact in specific ways a structural reservoir of ways of behaving, understanding and responding in ways which are to a certain extent particular to them in their social context (Bernstein, 1999, distinguishes between 'reservoir' and 'repertoire' to describe this process of individuation from structural characteristics). Individuals thus articulate repertoires of recognisable practices: 'patterns of bodily behaviour and routinized ways of understanding, knowing and desiring' (Reckwitz, 2002, 250). For leaders of change understanding these patterns of practice already in place is key to changing them.
2. People in universities, departments and work groups within them interact, and in so doing develop partly unique sets of practices, behaviours and meanings about the world they are dealing with, ones that are particular to their location. Universities end up with a *multiple cultural configuration*, with different sets of social practices in different locales within them (usually departments) as well as many commonalities. For leaders of change this means that a 'market gardening' approach rather than an 'agribusiness' one is likely to work: change will be received and implemented in different ways in different contexts, with local adaptations ('domestication') occurring, and different outcomes happening.
3. In their interactions – perhaps in developing a new syllabus, preparing to teach a course, or engaging in quality enhancement activities – individuals and groups use artefacts and tools of various sorts which themselves influence the social reality in particular ways. Thus, for example, the use of PowerPoint can shape the way classes are taught and content is presented (Adams, 2006). Meanwhile the social context can, conversely, shape the ways in which tools and artefacts are used. New initiatives such as those aimed at sustainability often involve changes in tool use, and so this interaction is significant for them. Another way of putting this is that artefacts can configure activity, inscribing relations between people and shaping the accomplishment of practices (Latour, 2000), but usually there is co-adaptation between people and artefacts: the reproduction of everyday life involves *actively* and effectively configuring complex assemblies of material objects, often in new ways. For leaders of change, thinking about the tools in use, of all sorts, and about possible new ones can be a key to changing practices.
4. Discourses – the particular forms of production of 'text' (talk, writing, etc) which are mediated by reservoirs of deeper social forces and social structures – express social reality and also operate to constrain and delimit it. Discourse and the social construction of reality work together. Thus 'managerialist' discourse expresses a particular view of the nature of universities and works to bracket out other views and other discourses. In the end discourse can shape practices. For leaders of change careful attention to discourses in use on the ground, and their own, is key to avoiding unnecessary and unhelpful communication breakdown miscommunication.
5. Individual identity, or subjectivity, is likewise both shaped by social context and itself can work to shape it. People interact at work and in so doing are also working to shape the identity of others and are themselves shaped, though they may also defend their identities from this process. However, identity is a lifetime project and people bring with them relatively permanent aspects of identities from previous

contexts. This is one source of difference, even conflict, within sites of social practice. Social characteristics such as cultural context are important in change processes, but so are individual people. Identity and practices are tied together and this can be a conservative force. Changing things can threaten identities and so the impact on this dimension of the social practices in place is well worth careful attention.

6. So, the historical background of individuals and also of the group is important. History, and narratives about history, has significant influences on social life in the present. These may be stories about academics' disciplines, about the institution, about other institutions or about the higher education system as a whole. Whatever they are, these histories and stories about the past will impact on change initiatives such as sustainability in the present: practices have an evolving trajectory, rarely a revolutionary one. There are semiotic trajectories too, trajectories of evoked meanings. Developing an anthropological understanding of the different narratives on the ground, and having key informants to help you with this, is important in making sure initiatives are congruent with them and do not transgress into areas of difficulty in terms of these related histories.
7. A corollary of all of the above is that social context, and its particularities, is a very significant factor in changing organizations. There are special features in every university, and every university department, every discipline, that mean that initiatives will be received, understood and implemented in ways which are, partly at least, unique. So, any attempt to generalise advice on how to change things is fraught with danger. Leaders on the ground need to understand their own context well, and what will work and not work there. This needs good ways of seeing.

Directing our attention to practices, with a view to changing them, means that leaders may find it helpful to bear in mind the following:

- Symbolic structures, particular orders of meaning in particular places, are very significant in conditioning practices, and in changing them.
- This involves implicit, tacit or unconscious layers of knowledge as well as explicit knowledge.
- Routinised ways of using the body are also involved – embodied knowledge, as Blackler (1995) calls it – and changes in these too are involved in change processes. This includes ways of using and interacting with 'things' in general and 'tools' in particular.
- Emotions, feelings and desires are implicated in this. They will be affected by enhancement initiatives, implicated in them and perhaps changed by them. Threats to identity and established practices can evoke strong emotional responses.

So, to summarise some key propositions from this theoretical and conceptual tradition as well as their corollaries in terms of leading change:

<b>Assumptions</b>	<b>Implications for Change Processes</b>	<b>Tactics for change</b>
Practices are 'engrooved' and hard to change	Start with where people are and work from that	Provide knowledge resources for reflection on current practices: eg case studies from elsewhere; information about sustainability indicators from other parts of the university
Discourses are part of social practices, describing the world and acting on it	Be careful to employ congruent discursive repertoires	Consider the medium as well as the message: how is the change initiative being communicated (and what does that mean); of the alternative ways of expressing the message, which is likely to be received in ways desirable to you?
Emotional responses are evoked by concepts and initiatives: they are laden with 'codes of signification' which are ingrained in practices	Use the practices in place as your starting point in thinking about likely responses	Target setting, with incentives, extending current practices
Identities are often tied to certain sets of practices	Be aware that proposals for change are hardly ever just technical, but impinge on interests, identities and emotions.	Employ careful engagement strategies, eg One-to-one meetings, especially those engaging rather than avoiding 'difficult' people/issues. Have meetings on-line and in person: brief and goal- and action-oriented
Appropriation (domestication) into an already established order almost always occurs	Expect different outcomes in different locations because of different established practices there. Present proposals for change in low enough resolution to allow domestication to occur	Offer incentives that are salient for the context.  In proposals for change suggest evocative examples for others to fill out and expand in ways relevant to them.
The significance of tools and their relational role in practices is not fixed, they are on the move	Tools can be fashioned in ways which guide practices in particular directions	Provide newly-designed proformas; self- and external review tools. Engage users in their design
The reception of innovation is conditioned by previous frameworks of meaning	Develop an anthropological awareness of practices on the ground in order to better predict how innovations will be received	Talk to key informants from different contexts about likely reception of innovation. Do your own research

To simplify things there are three key issues leaders would do well to remember in effective change strategies:

**Salience** (how important initiatives are in relation to the many others coming at staff and students, and making them more important)

**Congruence** (how they fit in, or don't, with current practices, and making them do so)

**Profitability** (how far current sets of interests and priorities are met, and how these can be altered for the future)

In addition it is important not to lose sight of institutional structures and processes which, as Scott et al (2008) point out, are often unhelpful. Attention here can help develop the following:

- Aligned practices: eg criteria for funding or promotion clearly aligned with strategies
- Aligned resource allocation tools: workload models, funding mechanisms
- Organizational architecture (committee structures, decision processes) aligned to explicit priorities

## Reflective Questions (for the conference)

On the basis of the above outline of frameworks for action it is helpful, finally, to ask a number of reflective questions which give leaders the opportunity to refine strategies further in ways which are appropriate and specific to their own context.

In small groups (no more than six) please address the following questions:

1. What are the current practices which bear on sustainability issues in the different contexts in my university (with a view to sustainability-focused *changed* practices)?
2. How can I get a better grasp of them, and the diversity of them, in my university?
3. Which elements of the sustainability agenda are likely to be salient, congruent and profitable in my university? Which are likely to run up against opposition?
4. What tactics for change are most appropriate and most likely to work in my context?
5. What discourse and discursive repertoires might be congruent in my context in describing sustainability issues and initiatives?
6. Which policy tools for sustainability might shape practices in desired directions, and how?

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