

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

Graham Gibbs

Idea Number 14, August 2014

Universities (and departments) have quite different organisational cultures – and some of these cultures help teaching more than others

I was once interviewing a Head of Department in an ancient research-intensive university and he told me about what sounded like a very effective teaching method used by one of his colleagues. “That sounds terrific” I replied “Do lots of your colleagues teach like that?” He was nonplussed but eventually said “I have no idea” and after a pause added “.. and it is none of my business”. It turned out that there was nothing resembling appraisal in this department, that no-one knew what teachers did when they taught, and that student feedback questionnaire data was routinely ignored. Teachers were trusted to do their teaching conscientiously and were left completely alone to get on with it, with no checks. The evidence from a sequence of external reviews showed that this was a wonderfully good department for students to learn in – a judgement confirmed by students themselves when I interviewed them. But this excellence was achieved almost entirely collegially – there was no visible ‘management’ at all. They were extremely careful to maintain their culture (through how they appointed new staff and by a raft of social processes) and a key role of the Head was to protect the Department from the corporate and bureaucratic madness they saw all around them.

In contrast I once visited a university that was run as if it were a biscuit factory. A series of

performance indicators for every module (almost all patently invalid or at least highly questionable) were tossed into a spreadsheet by a senior manager at the centre, and manipulated mathematically. Red or green blobs appeared in the right hand column. If the blob was red then the module was closed – automatically and without discussion - and 50% of all courses in the university had been closed in the last two years. And their National Student Survey scores were still terrible and their rankings were still bad and their finances were still in a mess. Teachers feared for their jobs, had little autonomy about what or how they taught, and kept their heads down.

At a top US technology university I was talking with senior academics to try and understand how they appeared to be quite good at teaching, right across the board, despite their obvious preoccupation with research. It turned out that they were entrepreneurial not just about filing patents from their research – but about almost everything. If anyone had a bright idea about teaching they would be encouraged to try it out. If it looked as though it worked (and they would want to see convincing evidence) then they would find money to expand it. And if that worked brilliantly then they would find a very great deal of money, or a clever mechanism, and it would be rolled out across the university to anyone who fancied taking it up. One of these

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

Graham Gibbs

‘clever mechanisms’ resulted in 80% of all undergraduates, across all degree programmes, having a spectacularly wonderful (and effective) additional learning experience – and at no additional cost to the university. And the University made a lot of this in their marketing. Individual teachers could choose to ‘opt in’ to this mechanism – and almost everybody did. This entrepreneurialism led to huge funding for innovations in teaching, though this funding was rarely provided by the university itself. It also resulted in some seemingly weird teaching practices, and even some subject areas being taught in alternative ways that students could choose between. There was no attempt whatsoever to make things look or feel the same – diversity, even an element of chaos, was seen as the inevitable consequence of creative approaches to make things work so well that they would be seen as ‘market leaders’.

Meanwhile at a small university where I was doing some consultancy on assessment I discovered that most teachers in one department were giving students feedback on drafts of assignments, and that students greatly appreciated this and found the feedback invaluable. However the teachers were doing this in secret, because this was explicitly forbidden by the quality assurance regulations. It is common for QA or examination regulations to forbid teachers from all kinds of useful and effective practices, in an attempt to control variation in quality. In this university an informal survey had shown that almost all academics perceived the dominant culture as ‘bureaucratic’, where most teaching decisions

were undertaken in response to rules – almost always other people’s rules. What seemed to matter to the centre was control and uniformity (which was described as ‘consistency’). Every module’s pattern of assessment looked suspiciously like everybody else’s – at least on paper.

I have also encountered several universities where there was an institutional mission that made sense for some subjects, but not for others, but was imposed on everybody regardless. For example elements of the mission may have concerned employability, retention and supporting students of diverse backgrounds. But some subjects had natural links to particular employers and had virtually 100% employability, while others produced graduates almost none of whom could have obtained paid work using what they had learnt. Some subjects attracted students of a consistent type with strong academic records who almost all graduated in three years, while other subjects attracted extraordinarily varied students many of whom were poorly prepared and, predictably, struggled to progress. The reality was that the institution’s mission was relevant to some parts of the university but not to others, and that institutional targets associated with its mission had been met by some departments decades ago while for others they were in practice unattainable. The university’s forceful attempts to orient everyone to its mission was disruptive given such internal variations, and these attempts greatly constrained what teachers could do in their teaching. Some innovations were supported while others were not. Some

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

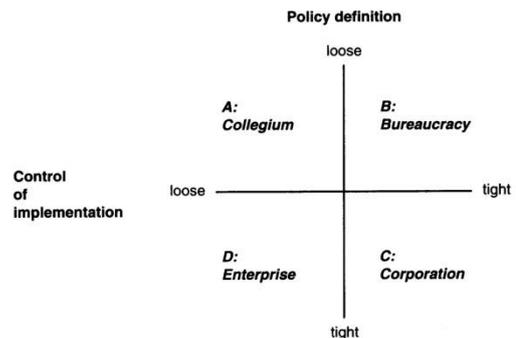
Graham Gibbs

practices were allowed but others were not - all in the service of 'alignment' with a mission defined by the centre.

The scope teachers have to develop their teaching, and what teaching looks like, and whether it is likely to work well, is framed by the organisational context teachers find themselves in.

Ian McNay developed a widely used conceptual framework for making sense of such extraordinarily varied ways of institutions operating. He distinguished four organisational models that vary on two dimensions: the degree of definition of policy and the degree of control of implementation. These dimensions are crucial to understanding the extent of nature of the development and implementation of learning and teaching in universities. Traditional collegial organisational structures and cultures that are common in long-established research-intensive universities exhibit both loose definition of policy and loose control over implementation. In contrast 'enterprise' cultures exhibit tight definition of policy and loose definition of implementation (see Figure 1). New (and often insecure) universities often exhibit tight control of both policy and implementation, with little trust in teachers and little scope for change.

Figure 1. McNay's four university models



The following summaries of the four models are based on Paul Ramsden's account of McNay, from his book on leadership.

Collegial cultures are characterised by freedom to pursue university and personal goals unaffected by external control. Standards are set by the international disciplinary scholarly community and evaluation is by peer review. Decision-making is consensual, management style is permissive. Students are seen as apprentice academics.

Bureaucratic cultures are characterised by regulation, rules, and consistency with standards related to regulatory bodies and external references (such as institutional quality assurance procedures). Evaluation is based on the audit of procedures. Decision making is rule-based. Students are seen as statistics.

Corporate cultures are characterised by an emphasis on loyalty to the university and its management. Management style is commanding and charismatic. There is a crisis-

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

Graham Gibbs

driven, competitive ethos. Decision-making is political and tactical. Evaluation is based on performance indicators and benchmarking. Students are seen as units of resource.

Entrepreneurial cultures are characterised by a focus on competence and an orientation to the outside world, involving continuous learning in a turbulent context. The management style involves devolved and dispersed leadership. Decision-making is flexible and emphasises accountable professional expertise. Its standards are related to market strength. Evaluation is based on achievement. Students are seen as partners.

Studies of perceptions of the shift over time from one organisational culture to another, within universities have identified much the same sequence: from collegial to bureaucratic to corporate and finally to enterprise, involving

first a tightening up on implementation, then a tightening up on goals and policy definition and finally a loosening up on control of implementation while retaining clear goals.

Research I have done on departments that are demonstrably wonderful at teaching, which attempted to discover how they managed it, did not find a single example of a successful department that operated bureaucratically.

Suggested reading

[McNay, I. \(1995\) From the collegial academy to the corporate enterprise: the changing culture of universities. In T. Schuller \(ed.\) The changing University? Buckingham: SRHE & Open University Press](#)

To comment or contribute your ideas, see SEDA's blog: thesedablog.wordpress.com