

# CHANGE THEORY AND CHANGING PRACTICES: ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN UNIVERSITIES.

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## ***Abstract***

This chapter argues that initiatives designed to enhance student engagement in universities need to be underpinned by an explicit and workable theory of change and change management. It sets out a social practice approach to conceptualising the operation of workgroups in higher education and goes on to elaborate the corollaries of this in terms of the management of change. The chapter concludes with a vignette designed to illustrate how these concepts might be elaborated in a departmental situation.

## ***The significance of change theory***

As long ago as 1986 Cerych and Sabatier identified one of the most significant factors causing the "mixed performance" of innovations as being the paucity of causal theories of change underpinning them. Their research into the genesis and progress of 9 higher education projects across Europe became a classic of implementation studies, yet their warnings about the key success factors in change processes continue to be ignored. Their alarm bell about the paucity of thinking about the mechanisms of change and how change processes work ('change theory') is especially significant, and still a deficit in most change initiatives. Several studies of more recent change projects (for example CSET 2008) have confirmed this view, showing that despite the injection of considerable resources, some initiatives designed to enhance learning and teaching in universities have limited effects because they lack a robust, well-developed and explicit change theory.

Gosling and Hannan's (2007) evaluation of the five-year, £350 million project called Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) demonstrated exactly this problem. CETLs were 74 specialist centres focusing on different aspects of learning and teaching in HE, spread around the higher education system in England and Northern Ireland. Gosling and Hannan note:

The model of change being employed was based on the theory that rewarding those already doing well, by establishing them as 'beacons' of excellence, was the way to improve overall standards; ...[This] appeared to be designed to make those already judged to be excellent even better than the rest, and it did not seem to allow those who were not successful the chance to learn how to do better next time... (Gosling and Hannan 2007: 634 and 645)

I have argued elsewhere (Trowler et al. 2005) that every innovation is imbued with a theory or theories of change. However these usually remain tacit, unchallenged and, like that underpinning the CETL initiative, are often ineffective, misconceived or even counter-productive. This chapter argues the vital importance of adopting an explicit and powerful change theory, appropriate to the context of change. In earlier publications colleagues and I have offered accounts and reflections on innovations which were, and were not, troubled by this issue (Trowler et al. 2013; Saunders 2011 a, and b; Bamber et al. 2009; CSET 2008; Trowler et al. 2002; Trowler (ed.) 2001).

### ***The underpinning theory of reality: the ontology of change***

At the foundation of any change theory is an ontological theory, a theory of the nature of social reality. An example is the prevalent theory of the reflective practitioner (Schon 1983, 1987) which suggests that the development of reflective practice within universities is an effective way to bring about the enhancement of learning and teaching institution-wide. Based on this approach, educational developers have devoted a lot of attention to encouraging reflective practice amongst new lecturers in particular (Ecclestone 1996). Underneath this theory of change is an ontological theory: methodological individualism. This posits that the agency of individuals can lead to systemic change, that individual attitudes, behaviours and choices are the significant phenomena driving the social world.

However, critics from various positions argue that this ontological prioritisation of an ABC perspective (Attitudes, Behaviours and Choices: Shove et al. 2012) is ill-founded. From a critical realist or social realist perspective, for example, it misses the significance of structural influences and real forces that condition attitudes and behaviour and so choices. Margaret Archer's work (1995, 2007, 2010) is significant here as is that of Baskhar (1989).

The position set out here is similarly critical of methodological individualism, being rooted instead in social practice theory, which like critical realism takes account of both agency and structure in its understanding of change. A practice perspective re-focuses attention away from the individual actor, focusing instead on situated *practices* which are extra-individual. A 'practice' is viewed as an organised constellation of group activities: it is a social phenomenon not an individual one, as a habit is (Schatzki 2012). As this occurs the co-constitution of meaning happens. So social practice is always relational, not individual: a 'social practice' involves the collective development of routinised recurrent behaviours in the performance of tasks. These are connected to mental and emotional states, including definitions of the situation, background knowledge, forms of understanding, know-how and emotional conditions and motivational drivers (a definition developed from Reckwitz 2002, 249). Social contexts involve multiple overlapping and nested sets of practices which influence each other.

Social practices deploy what Giddens (1984) calls "practical consciousness": knowledge of how to 'go on' without conscious attention to how the performance is enacted. This involves

acquiring and deploying a set of dispositions, perceptions and actions which give people who are immersed in them a ‘feel for the game’, an intuitive understanding of what is ‘right’ (Bourdieu 1990) .

A practice perspective also attends to the role of artefacts in practice performance, to material mediation. The accomplishment of social practice always involves artefacts of one form or another, and there is mutual engagement of artefact use and practice performance: artefacts shape the performance while performance shapes the detail of artefact deployment.

Practice theory stresses the situatedness of knowing, saying, doing and relating. Understanding and explaining the social world is a fundamentally complex task. What is ‘known’ and practised in one context does not always apply in another. This means that achieving transfer between social contexts is not a simple enterprise. *Time* is as important as *place* in this. Social practices are always emergent; there is a historicity to them so that the past, present and future are all evident at any one time, and this too is situated (Boud 2012).

So this ontological perspective sees the social world as ensembles of practices enacted by groups which have been configured to achieve specific outcomes through their activities. For social practice theory, social structures exist and have significant effects on practices, even though social agents may not be aware of them or their power. Practices always have a material dimension, and one which periodically involves an uneven struggle for control of resources, power and discursive and knowledge practices.

### ***Building practical change theory on this ontology***

The implications of practice theory for change initiatives are profound. That ontological perspective shifts us away from the ‘ABC’ theory of change towards the enactment of practices. Yet because it is individual people whom we meet every day, whom we talk to and plan with, there is a gravitational pull to explaining the success or failure of change initiatives in terms of the ABC theory. Managers and change agents often think that people they manage are ‘change averse’ (Fullan and Scott 2009). They complain that trying to encourage people to reform what they do is like ‘herding cats’, that they have the wrong goals and motivations, that they talk too much but do not act enough. Change agents often find there are a few enthusiasts for initiatives, but that engaging others beyond these few enthusiasts is an unsurmountable challenge. These complaints see the social world as comprising individuals, either amenable or not to desired change.

However, social practice theory can shed new light on the situation. Whenever significant innovations begin they presage new discourses, new types of tool, new agendas and the new configurations of power relations and subjectivities. But *existing* sets of social practices condition responses and fundamentally affect the implementation process. To expect a smooth ride to "reform" in such circumstances is naive. As Fuller says:

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 are essential for implementing change. (Fuller 2007: 110)

However, the way the change process is managed can have important effects on outcomes; and this is where the significance of an explicit and robust *theory of change*, based on a practice ontology, comes in.

The perspective proposed here builds on complex-adaptive change theory (CAST) and associated management practices (Dooley 1997; Holland 2006). This elaborates the implications of a social practice ontology for change and change management in a way which is congruent with that view of social reality but which is practical.

CAST is sceptical of initiatives which are implemented only via a technical-rational, top-down approach, based on rigid pre-defined 'visions' made real by a series of incremental steps. Rather, universities are seen as complex adaptive systems operating in a turbulent and unpredictable environment. They have multiple goals which change over time and are often mutually contradictory. When universities or their constituent parts change, they always do so on the basis of a given current situation, which is quite tenacious, and on the basis of a historical trajectory, arriving at that point. Actions by change managers can have subtle and unforeseen outcomes, sometimes in areas apparently unrelated to those in which the action is taken.

As a result of this, change management practices based on a CAST approach involve sensitivity to context and history, fostering comfort with uncertainty and acceptance of variable outcomes in the short term. CAST-influenced management involves a willingness to allow time for fundamental changes to occur and an ability to build consensus by adapting plans and approaches. Leaders informed by CAST develop an ability to understand the patterns of practice already in place, the forms of knowing as well as the possibilities and limits of their own abilities to manage these (Spender 2008). They recognise that reform will involve changes of a different character in different locations, because of different histories and differences in sets of practices that have been developed *in situ*. They also see that the artefacts in use of are great significance in shaping practices, and that changing those will have significant, but somewhat unpredictable, effects. A willingness to adapt to context, and to be permissive of adaptation rather than simple adoption of innovations within the broad scope of the project, is one of the hallmarks of the successful application of the CAST approach. Key phrases for the CAST-influenced change agent are: extensive discussion; delayed movement to decision; adaptability; low-resolution initial planning and vision; inclusive decision-making; participant engagement; encouragement of challenges to the status quo; high quality information; self-organization locally; acceptance of diversity; frequent feedback cycles; permissiveness towards adaptation.

## ***Change theory and student engagement***

As noted, a social practice theory-influenced CAST perspective stresses the importance for leaders of clusters of social practice already in place and of the potential salience, congruence and profitability (or otherwise) of *new* initiatives in relation to those practice clusters. This means that a careful analysis of, first, the innovation, second the context of implementation and third the relationship or ‘fit’ between them needs to be undertaken bearing these three features, salience, congruence and profitability, in mind. This process can be categorised under the following headings:

1. Establishing the focus for engagement initiatives
2. Establishing the parameters of change
3. Establishing appropriate implementation strategies

The chapter next addresses each in turn, using the example of initiatives aimed at enhancing student engagement.

### **1. Establishing the focus for engagement initiatives**

Change agents involved in enhancing student engagement face a decision concerning which focus of student engagement they primarily wish to address, and hence which areas of practice. Trowler (2010) established three foci of student engagement: in learning and teaching; in the structure and processes of higher education, including representation; in identification with the higher education project. Elaborating on this sparqs<sup>1</sup> (2013) student engagement framework for Scotland identified five foci:

1. students feeling part of a supportive institution;
2. students engaging in their own learning;
3. students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning;
4. formal mechanisms for quality and governance;
5. influencing the student experience at national level

Others have proposed different categorisations (Jary and Lebeau 2009; Dubet 2000). Whichever is prioritised, these different dimensions of student engagement usually mobilise different, though overlapping and nested areas of practice, though the different foci are interconnected, as Ashwin et al (2012) have shown. For those leading enhancement initiatives the first step is to

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<sup>1</sup> Sparqs is *Student Participation and Quality in Scotland*. It is publicly funded to support student engagement in Scottish higher education and the quality of the learning experience there.

identify and prioritise areas of need in the recurrent practices in their context. This has consequences for the locus of interventions and the shape of the congruence, salience and profitability of any desired changes there.

Establishing the focus of the need leads to the second task, establishing the extent of desired changes.

## **2. Establishing the parameters of change**

One of the corollaries of thinking about the congruence of any desired enhancements to student engagement with current practices (understood in both behavioural and phenomenological terms) is that there are limits to what is achievable, at least in the short term. Envisaging revolutionary change is unlikely to succeed in higher education contexts. So the question of "fit" becomes a significant one: what is achievable in *this* place? Here the axioms associated with CAST become particularly significant: leadership approaches based on this theory are well adapted for gaining a "feel" for the limits and possibilities of change. This leads to the third activity, which concerns implementation approaches.

## **3. Establishing appropriate implementation strategies**

Thinking carefully through the character of recurrent practices in place, and the likely shape of innovations that will address areas of most need leads to consideration of implementation strategies that are likely to be successful. CAST approaches foreground the significance of the profitability for groups (or threats of losses of various sorts) associated with changes in practices. Such approaches will consider the artefacts in place, and perhaps new artefacts that could be introduced and likely effects of doing so. They will take into account issues of power and identities, and how these might be threatened or otherwise affected by likely changes. They will be based on an expectation that outcomes will not necessarily be predictable, and that other factors influencing changes in recurrent practices will have simultaneous effects.

## **A vignette**

Rather than conclude this chapter with further comments of the sort above, which are pitched at a somewhat abstract level, I finish with a vignette of my own creation. It is designed to concretise the discussion rather than being offered as an example of 'the right way' to do things. I hope my comments to this point have shown that it is not possible to offer universal models of the 'one best way' to implement changes because of the significance of contextual contingencies. Rather it is designed to offer further food for

thought.

The Department of Literature and Creative Writing at Sutherland City University was under pressure. Results from a postgraduate research experience survey were poor, particularly the feedback from postgraduates under the heading "research culture". At the same time the national HE quality assurance body had introduced a student engagement chapter into its quality code. This required universities to engage their students in various structures and processes. The Head of Department (HoD) saw that they would not do well in relation to those requirements either.

The problem for the HoD was that this was a department of two halves. The Literature staff tended to take relatively conventional approach; they were interested in studying the Canon and developing an appreciation and understanding of fine works amongst their students. Meanwhile staff on the Creative Writing side were pedagogically somewhat less interested in transmitting and discussing content, having a very clear focus on students, their skills, involving them in much decision-making at all levels. Wenger (1998) might describe the two halves as two communities of practice, but like most workgroups in universities each half also had their internal divisions, status and power differences, and different approaches. Nonetheless they each had a set of nested social practices which framed their professional lives.

The HoD felt certain that the main issues to be addressed lay in one side of the Department, but to give a voice to this would be to cause an eruption, with staff giving extended explanations about the different nature of the disciplinary specialisms and the deterministic nature of the subject in terms of teaching approaches. Political and personal rivalries would come to the fore, with powerful characters throwing their weight around. The Head knew that this was not a productive way to go.

The Head's response was as follows. At a staff meeting she introduced the issues, and then stated her view that surveys like the postgraduate research experience one and the requirements of the quality assurance agency were part of an unhelpful control culture, but that improvements were necessary. There was a need to raise scores on the survey, and a need to demonstrate compliance to the quality agency requirements. And anyway, she noted, who could really be against an "inclusive" culture?

The Literature side took a limited and pragmatic approach in the discussion. For example the research experience survey asks postgraduates about participation in departmental seminars and the opportunities they get to discuss work with other postgraduates and the wider research community. So staff suggestions centred on sending messages to postgraduates and putting up posters for seminars they might want to attend. The Creative

Writing side wanted to show that they were already doing everything necessary, and anyway (one of them said) wasn't it somewhat ironic that they were having this discussion in a meeting which specifically excluded the student voice? The response from the other side was a defensive/passive-aggressive reaction.

Wanting to forestall an argument likely to produce more heat than light, the Head asked two individuals, one from each side of the Department, to liaise with colleagues and come up with a plan (she had already got agreement from the two to do this). After three months, the two people were to return to the staff meeting with a series of suggestions for change. The staff meeting agreed that these two should lead developments: no-one else wanted the work. The Head knew that the two people would be good at listening and negotiating, but that they also had the respect of their colleagues. She believed that change processes needed to be resourced and to have a good, but emergent, implementation plan.

After the meeting she provided a number of resources to the two. These included case studies from similar departments in other institutions, a list of contacts with experience in the area, including the national and institutional student unions, and some examples of specific changes that had been made elsewhere, and the effect they had had.

Together they discussed the principles they would work to in this effort. They would get the broad involvement of staff and students in making changes; they would work to develop a shared purpose; plans would remain emergent until there was movement to consensus; decision-making would be inclusive with participant engagement; challenges to the status quo would be encouraged; high quality information available to everyone. Meanwhile there would be acceptance of the diversity that existed across the Department, with no attempt at homogeneous approaches.

After a process of discussion and negotiation with staff and student representatives the following measures were put in place:

1. Student representatives would each be allocated 50 euros a term to take course convenors for coffee and cake. That time together was to be spent making sure that the representatives were well informed about the issues on the agenda of forthcoming meetings at which they would represent the student body. The intention was to switch representatives' role in these meetings from being merely critical to making well-informed contributions to the discussion in a more positive way.
2. Two on-campus postgraduate students were asked to lead a series of seminars. Students would set the agenda and invite specialists to come to discuss the issues. A small budget was provided for the expenses of any external specialists.
3. A two-day writing retreat was organized for staff and students together, with clear goals



and required outputs.

4. There were meetings with other departments in the University who were thought to have made some progress in the areas of engagement, with discussion about the things they were doing. Subsequent discussions in the Department of Literature and Creative writing focused on what could be adapted, what was not appropriate and what would simply not work for them.

5. A particular opportunity was presented by concurrent work within the Department on the development of online provision – a wholly e-learning version of a course currently presented face-to-face. People with various roles in different organizations, including the National Students Union and e-learning specialists were invited to discuss ways in which students could contribute to online provision at the same time as studying the content.

6. The course evaluation tool that the Department used was amended. Like many such evaluation schedules around the world, this asked questions about students' satisfaction with the resources provided, the quality of teaching, the accessibility of the presentation of content and so on. After a Departmental meeting reviewing student engagement surveys from around the world and the discussing good engagement-indicator questions for *their* students, a new system was put in place. This learned from latest practice in National Survey of Student Engagement (2013) and included questions about collaborative learning, high-impact learning practices, involvement in decision-making about their learning and the quality of interactions in the university. Evaluation results from all courses would be published internally for staff and students each year.

This vignette has concentrated particularly on the learning and teaching focus of student engagement. The readers' context will, of course, be a different one. It is likely that other priorities will apply, and other approaches will be more productive. The micro-politics of the situation will certainly be different, and the resources, including knowledge resources will differ in multiple ways too. To repeat: the theoretical and conceptual parts of this chapter and this illustrative vignette are designed only to offer food for thought.

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