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2014

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Roxå, T. (2014). *Microcultures in the meso level of higher education organisations – the Commons, the Club, the Market and the Square*.

*Total number of authors:*

1

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# Microcultures in the meso level of higher education organisations

– the Commons, the Club, the Market, and the Square.

Torgny Roxå



**LUND**  
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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

by due permission of the Faculty of Engineering, Lund University, Sweden.

To be defended at Stora Hörsalen IKDC, Lund.

14<sup>th</sup> of May at 10.15.

*Faculty opponent*

Prof. Keith Trigwell

Organisation LUND UNIVERSITY Department of Design Sciences Engineering Education Author Torgny Roxå	Document name Doctoral Dissertation
	Date of issue 1 April 2014
Title and subtitle: The Commons, the Club, the Market, and the Square – Microcultures that define the meso level in higher education organisations	
<p>Higher education (HE) is and has been a growing concern for various stakeholders for a considerable time. Sometimes contradictory attempts to reform HE have increased the pressure on academic teachers and contributed to an experience of demand overload.</p> <p>This research conceptualises HE organisations so that dynamics related to change and stability become understandable. A socio-cultural perspective on organisations is applied, where interactions between academic teachers form the core of the analysis. It is assumed that through these interactions, academic teachers construct and maintain what they hold to be true in teaching and learning.</p> <p>The research is conducted in a research-intensive institution using ethnographically inspired methods, such as observations, interviews and narratives.</p> <p>Results maintain that more or less distinct collegial contexts form the organisational meso level, and that such <i>microcultures</i> in turn influence the individual academics. The influence is reciprocal; individuals as knowledgeable agents can influence the existing norms in the microculture, but due to the complexity in the day-to-day situations they mostly do not.</p> <p>Microcultures shape collegial interactions and thereby influence matters like belonging, identities, and status. It is argued that these microcultures, which are loosely coupled to each other, provide opportunities for professional sophistication as well as for defensive withdrawal from the organisational context surrounding them.</p> <p>The collegial interaction enables microcultures to be active as agents (partly independent organisational units) inside organisations. For example, academically strong microcultures themselves decide whether or not to be influenced by external pressures, whether these are policies formulated by senior management in the organisation to which they belong, or by other policymakers.</p> <p>Microcultures are linked to each other through weak ties, that is, interactions of lower intensity and frequency than the interactions inside the microcultures. It is hypothesised that these weak ties are decisive for organisational learning, coordination, and governance, especially in times of external pressure. The results presented in this thesis as well as in the literature suggest that weak ties are essential for understanding how well an organisation is functioning.</p> <p>Microcultures are signified by norms, traditions and recurrent practices that can vary considerably. This variation allows microcultures to adapt to the specifics of their respective contexts and thereby increase their functionality. It is shown that microcultures display similar design principles. The appearances, functions and applications of these design principles are keys for future exploration of microcultures in higher education organisations.</p> <p>Microcultures differ from each other along two dimensions that are linked to variations in the internal collegial interaction. First, the degree to which the colleagues who share the microculture consider each other to be significant. Second, the degree to which members experience a shared responsibility for an educational practice. The analysis resulted in four types of microcultures: the commons, the market, the club, and the square. These are presented as heuristics that are applicable to future empirical exploration of higher education organisations.</p> <p>Overall, it is essential to focus on the meso level of higher education organisations and the patterns of collegial interaction that result in various microcultures. This is, in turn, essential for understanding how higher education organisations function in times of increased pressure from various stakeholders.</p>	
Key words	
Classification system and/or index terms (if any)	
Supplementary bibliographical information	Language: English
ISSN and key title	ISBN
Recipient's notes	Number of pages 182
	Price
	Security classification

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# Microcultures in the meso level of higher education organisations

– the Commons, the Club, the Market, and the Square.

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Faculty of Engineering, Department of Design Sciences

ISBN 978-91-7473-933-6 (Printed)

ISBN 978-91-7473-934-3 (Pdf)

ISSN 1650-9773 Publication 51

EAT 2014

Printed in Sweden by Media-Tryck, Lund University

Lund 2014



# Abstract

Higher education is and has been a growing concern for various stakeholders for a considerable time. Different attempts to influence higher education have often been pursued with strong determination. These sometimes contradictory efforts have increased the pressure on academic teachers and thereby contributed to an experience of demand overload.

The purpose of this thesis is to conceptualise higher education organisations so that dynamics related to change and stability become understandable, especially in the midst of demand overload. To accomplish this, a socio-cultural perspective on organisations is applied. According to this perspective, interactions between academic teachers form the core of the analysis. It is assumed that through these interactions, academic teachers construct and maintain what they hold to be true in teaching and learning.

The research is conducted within a traditional research-intensive higher education organisation. Predominantly qualitative methods are used, partly because the overall aim is to generate theory, but also because according to the perspective chosen, individuals construct and maintain their teaching and learning realities collectively. Thus, the methods used are ethnographically inspired observations in combinations with interviews and narratives.

The results are linked to the literature. Both maintain that more or less distinct collegial contexts define the organisational meso level as well as that such collegial contexts or *microcultures* in turn influence the individual academics. The influence is reciprocal; individuals as knowledgeable agents can influence the existing norms in the microculture, but due to the complexity in the day-to-day situations they mostly do not. Thus it can be concluded that individual academics are influenced by microcultures both individually and collectively, and that they simultaneously construct and reconstruct them. Microcultures shape collegial interactions and thereby influence matters like belonging, identities, and status. It is argued that these microcultures, which are loosely coupled to each other, provide opportunities for professional sophistication as well as for defensive withdrawal from the organisational context surrounding them.

The collegial interaction enables microcultures to be active as agents (partly independent organisational units) inside organisations. It is shown, for example, that academically strong microcultures themselves decide whether or not to be

influenced by external pressures, whether these are policies formulated by senior management in the organisation to which they belong, or by other policymakers.

Microcultures are linked to each other through weak ties, that is, interactions of lower intensity and frequency than the interactions inside the microcultures. It is hypothesised that these weak ties are decisive for organisational learning, coordination, and governance, especially in times of external pressure. The results presented in this thesis as well as in the literature suggest that weak ties are essential for the understanding of how well an organisation functions. Aspects of this claim are explored in the thesis. It is shown that teaching experiences gained by teachers are not exchanged through weak ties in the particular organisation studied.

Microcultures are signified by norms, traditions and recurrent practices that can vary considerably. This variation allows microcultures to adapt to the specifics of their respective contexts and thereby increase their functionality. Through a study of five academically strong microcultures it is shown that even though they function differently, they all display similar *design principles*. The appearances, functions and applications of these design principles are most likely keys for future exploration of microcultures in higher education organisations.

Microcultures differ from each other along two dimensions that are linked to variations in the internal collegial interaction: First, the degree to which the colleagues who share the microculture consider each other to be significant, and, second, the degree to which members experience a shared responsibility for an educational practice. To be significant means that the interacting parties are important for each other when it comes to solving problems, exploring possibilities, and forming personal beliefs. The analysis introduces four types of microcultures: the commons, the market, the club, and the square. These are presented as heuristics that are applicable to future empirical exploration of higher education organisations.

The evidence of microcultures and the suggested variation among them are important contributions to higher education research for those interested in influencing academic teaching as well as those who defend significant values in higher education.

Overall, it is essential to focus on the meso level of higher education organisations and the patterns of collegial interaction that result in various microcultures. This is essential for understanding how higher education organisations function in times of increased pressure from various stakeholders. It is also essential for an increased understanding of how academic teachers orient themselves in times of threatening demand overload.

# Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning

Det knyts stora förhoppningar till högre utbildning. Nästan var tredje svensk tillbringar några år vid universitet och högskolor. Den erfarenhet de får bär de med sig i hela sitt vuxna liv. Den påverkar deras åsikter om vetenskap, kritiskt tänkande och universitetslärare så länge de lever. Högre utbildning ska förse professioner, myndigheter och näringsliv med kvalificerad arbetskraft. Landet ska bli konkurrenskraftigt som en kunskapsekonomi. Men också demokratin ska stärkas och framtidsfrågor som miljö, klimat och global politik ska hanteras. Det är svårt att överskatta förhoppningarna som knyts till den högre utbildningen. Med detta följer försök att påverka, utveckla och förbättra. Resurser avdelas till detta: regler formas, rapporter genomförs, utvärderingar sker kontinuerligt och periodvis. Hela tiden kontrolleras om förväntningar uppfylls. Hela tiden efterfrågas utveckling, förändring och anpassning till efterfrågan.

Trots dessa förhoppningar och intensiva försök till påverkan finns det inte mycket kunskap kring hur organisationer inom högre utbildning fungerar. Det gör att försöken att påverka mer styrs av de olika intressenternas egna villkor än de villkor som gäller inom de organisationer som ska påverkas. Därmed finns det en risk att de, i sin iver, inte åstadkommer något annat än mängder av merarbete för universitetslärarna eller att de rent av förstör det som redan är bra.

Den här avhandlingen nyanserar bilden och beskriver högre utbildning på ett sätt som både kan användas för att förbättra det som behöver förbättras men också att bevara och bygga vidare på det som redan fungerar bra.

Min undersökning koncentrerar sig på verksamheten, det vill säga där jobbet görs. Chefer och ledare hamnar inte i centrum. Men inte heller de enskilda akademiska lärarna. Istället handlar det om hur akademiska lärare och andra arbetar tillsammans. Precis som vanligt när människor gör något tillsammans så skapar akademiska lärare traditioner som handlar om hur jobbet ska göras. Erfarna lärare kanske inte märker det längre, inte som nya medarbetare gör. De kan tänka: ”Jaha, det är tydligen så man ska göra här.” Dessa traditioner är en del av väldigt lokala idéer om hur undervisning och utbildning ska göras och se ut. De formar små mikrokulturer inom de större organisationerna.

Det är lätt att se hur sådana mikrokulturer blir konservativa. Medarbetarna gör som de är vana att göra. Det blir svårt att utveckla verksamheten. Men i tider av nedskärningar och mer stressade medarbetare så fungerar också mikrokulturen



som ett försvar, den hjälper till att bevara den kvalitetsnivå som faktiskt finns. Dessutom kan vissa mikrokulturer, om de är bra och får hålla på, nå en väldigt hög kvalitet i det de gör; precis som andra mikrokulturer kan stagnera och kanske bli sämre.

Därför är det viktigt att förstå hur mikrokulturer fungerar, hur de skiljer sig från varandra och hur de utvecklas. Jag visar i avhandlingen att mikrokulturer kan karaktäriseras utifrån hur medarbetarna ser på varandra och på den uppgift man har att lösa. Det vill säga, de andra medarbetarna kan vara viktiga för mig. Jag låter mig påverkas av dem. De är *signifikanta* för mig. Eller så delar vi bara en plats utan att de betyder något särskilt för mig. Det kan också vara så att vi som arbetar tillsammans upplever att vi *delar ansvaret* för det vi gör; eller så jobbar var och en för sig själv utan att direkt bry sig om vad de andra gör.

Utifrån de här dimensionerna beskriver och diskuterar jag fyra typer av mikrokulturer:

- *allmänningen*, de inblandade är signifikanta för varandra och känner att de delar ett gemensamt ansvar;
- *klubben*, de inblandade är signifikanta för varandra men känner inte att de delar något ansvar för verksamheten;
- *marknaden*, de inblandade är inte signifikanta för varandra men de upplever i alla fall ett delat ansvar; och
- *torget*, de inblandade är inte signifikanta för varandra och känner heller inget något delat ansvar.

Dessa olika typer av mikrokulturer har olika förutsättningar att fungera bra och påverkas på olika sätt av förväntningar som kommer utifrån.

Ett annat sätt att skilja mikrokulturerna åt är att studera enligt vilka principer de fungerar, till exempel hur riktigt bra mikrokulturer fungerar. Jag ställer därför frågan: vilka funktions-principer är viktiga i bra mikrokulturer? I avhandlingen föreslår och beskriver jag åtta sådana principer.

De resultat jag för fram i avhandlingen kan öka förståelsen för hur organisationer inom högre utbildning faktiskt fungerar. Därmed blir det möjligt att bevara och lära sig av det som redan är bra och att stödja utveckling där stöd behövs.

# Acknowledgement

Two questions have been my companions throughout my professional life as an academic developer. The first: Why would an academic teacher want to change his or her teaching? Especially if the teaching works fairly well as it is. Over time the answer became two answers. The first relates to the cognitive atmosphere of inquiry that permeates academia. A teacher will change the teaching if something new and intriguing emerges within his or her mental horizon. If this happens and it causes cognitive dissonance, it can result in innovation in teaching. My job as an academic developer was and in many ways still is to inspire teachers to make new intriguing observations of student learning. For this insight I owe a lot to my first boss and mentor Eva Falk Nilsson. You trusted me.

The second answer emerged later. The teacher has to adjust his or her way of teaching to that of the colleagues he or she wants to play with. This is a socio-cultural perspective. No man or woman is an island; we all have to fit in somewhere. We are all linked to those who are significant to us, to those we trust and find important to us. This is true whether we are in the schoolyard as children, or in a university as professors. This insight I owe to Peter Arvidson, my late colleague, who said to me on one unusually sunny summer day: “It is all about Berger and Luckmann”, the authors of *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. It was the kind of day when things appear clear and intelligible. Social realities are constructed and maintained during conversations. Because teaching is a social phenomenon, my job as an academic developer from that day on was to support richer and more frequent conversations about teaching and student learning among academic teachers.

The second question is: How does one change a university? This question emerged after years of experience where university teachers were inspired and did change their private teaching. Despite this, I thought, not much happened. This is why leadership, management and governance became interesting, but still from a perspective where the doings of the individual teachers were important. The role of organisational developer was now added to my job as an academic developer. I became a developer of academia. The joy of this enterprise I share with my colleague Katarina Mårtensson. Thank you Katarina.

Together with all the teachers at the Faculty of Engineering where I work, and my colleagues at Genombrottet, we launched an experiment. How could the ideas resulting from the insights described above be made real in pedagogical courses, in

a faculty wide reward system for good teachers, in everyday conversations about teaching, and in a faculty wide initiative to improve academic teaching? Could the ideas be realised? This grand experiment did turn out well, thanks to the further thinking and hard work by teachers in the faculty and by my colleagues Roy Andersson, Thomas Olsson, and Anders Ahlberg. The learning trajectory for myself was breathtaking, perhaps just because so much learning was shared with and inspired by Per Warfvinge.

As explicitly formulated: The aim was to afford this Faculty of Engineering a positive reputation for its efforts to systematically and consciously develop teaching for the benefit of student learning and personal development. This ambition took me on a trip into the world of academic development. Colleagues in Sweden, in Europe, and in the world are all worth mentioning as you all contributed to my learning. But since three is a magic number I'll only mention Graham Gibbs, Liz Beaty, and Prosser & Trigwell. Thank you all for your writing and for your example.

But the trajectory took me further, beyond the borders of the teaching and learning solar system I was so familiar with. Like the spacecraft Voyager, I left the tail wind of the star that had shown me the way. I now became a researcher forced to formulate my own personal truths despite critique and self-doubt. In this, my most recent adventure, I thank everybody for support and especially those who have endured my habit of rewriting everything – all the time. Per Odenrick, Thomas Olsson and Anders Persson were never harsh as supervisors. Perhaps they should have been, just as harsh as Björn Stensaker, who gave me a final push by demonstrating how constructive critique can be experienced as palpable. I now sincerely hope you all did a good job.

I'm on a trajectory, indeed I am. Some people have travelled with me longer than others. My parents, Sven and Moa, who taught me that my voice always counts; Torbjörn, my brother and role model in leadership, who practiced leadership on me from the first day of my life; Lena, my sister, who showed me by example that challenges always can be overcome; and my friend Matz, who inspired me to elevate my thoughts, always.

Second to none is you, Ebba, my wife, my companion, my challenge, and my comfort. My time with you has shaped my world into a truly fantastic and amazing life. You are the only one I allow to shape my inner self, because you do it so well. Somewhere along the line Petra and Sofie entered into my life. The two of you rocked my world and continue to do so. Thank you for being my daughters. And thank you Frodo for being there when my fear of darkness threatened this entire project.

# Appended papers

This thesis is based on the following papers, which will be referred to by their Roman numerals in the body of the text:

- I. Mårtensson, K., Roxå, T. and Stensaker, B., 2012, From Quality Assurance to Quality Practices: An investigation of strong microcultures in teaching and learning. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-12, iFirst Article.

*Together with Katarina Mårtensson I designed, conducted and reported the underlying case-study. Björn Stensaker drafted the introduction of the paper. Together with Katarina I wrote the first draft for the main body of the paper. Katarina finalised the paper into a publication.*

- II. Roxå, T., Mårtensson K. and Alveteg, M., 2011, Understanding and Influencing Teaching and Learning Cultures at University: A network approach. *Higher Education*, 62(1): 99-111.

*I introduced the literature from network theory and its application to organisational culture in higher education, and wrote the first iteration of the paper. The authors together developed a number of subsequent iterations. Mattias designed and wrote the illustrative case study. Katarina wrote the final iterations and responded to corrections suggested by the journal.*

- III. Roxå, T. and Renc-Roe, J. Why Experiences Gained During Academic Teaching Fail to Support Organisational Learning in Higher Education? (Submitted to a scientific journal.)

*I designed the study and invited Joanna Renc-Roe to do the interviews. We analysed the material together and I wrote the paper.*

- IV. Roxå, T. and Mårtensson, K., 2009, Significant Conversations and Significant Networks – Exploring the backstage of the teaching arena. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(5): 547-559.

*The authors designed the study, collected and analysed the material, and wrote the paper together.*

- V. Roxå, T. and Mårtensson K., 2012, How Effects from Teacher Training of Academic Teachers Propagate into the Meso Level and Beyond. *Teacher Development in Higher Education. Existing Programs, Program Impact, and Future Trend*. E. Simon and G. Pleschova (Eds.), London, Routledge.

*I wrote the main body of the text. The authors developed later iterations together. I finalised the text and responded to corrections suggested by the editors and Routledge.*

- VI. Roxå, T. and Mårtensson, K. Higher Education Commons – a framework for comparison of midlevel units in higher education organisations. (Submitted to a scientific journal.)

*I introduced the perspective from political science and wrote the paper using suggestions made by Katarina. The authors together designed, conducted and reported the underlying case-study.*

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# Introduction

## Reform efforts in higher education

Higher education is and has been a growing concern for external stakeholders for a considerable time. Higher education dominates the national budget as politicians seek to enhance the ‘knowledge economy’. Students, who are encountering teaching first hand, have a personal interest in the quality of education. The society as a whole, employers, parents, taxpayers in general, all are interested in the quality and outcome of invested resources. In addition, many academics are interested in trying out new methods and strategies to deal with what they perceive to be opportunities of enhancing student understanding in the disciplines. These interests have resulted in numerous attempts to influence higher education.

In Europe, the Bologna Process is perhaps the strongest example among these reform efforts. The idea is to unify higher education systems across the continent, but also to introduce a new language where terms like ‘learning outcomes’ and ‘constructive alignment’ are important parts. Quality routines are part of this reform as states seek to control and monitor the degree of implementation.

Technology is another source for inspirations for those seeking to reform higher education. The latest may be the MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses), but technology has been viewed as a potential driver for change for a long time.

In a Swedish context, the Swedish National Union of Students released in 2013, a report where they, from a student perspective, argue for a more student centred teaching in higher education (Lundberg, 2013).

Further, the Confederation of Swedish Enterprises is an active advocate for what they consider to be an acute need to develop higher education in an applied direction making industry a closer partner. Suggestions have included that students studying humanistic subjects should have less favourable economic support, since according to the organisation, they do not contribute to economic growth (Söderling, 2011). The arguments are always dressed in economic terms such as a claim that taxpayers would save close to 2 billion SEK if the Confederation’s suggestions become a reality (Almerud, 2013).

These are but a few examples of the voices of all those interested in changing higher education. The change initiatives often strive in different directions; and



this in itself constitutes a problem. The pressure these stakeholders maintain on higher education might well be legitimate. After all, higher education in Sweden is a publicly funded practice and makes up a major part of the national state budget, in fact the largest (Universitetskanslersämbetet, 2013). But all these voices competing to make an impact also strain the system, and thereby make it increasingly harder for academic teachers to do their job. It can also be argued that the stakeholders are predominantly occupied with the perceived need for change in higher education and less interested in the internal lives of higher education organisations. These stakeholders threaten to pull higher education in different directions and eventually also apart.

Good will and determination do not constitute the problem here. Neither are resources, if by those are meant allocated resources aimed at influencing higher education. This type of funding has increased continuously internationally over a period of 40 years (Gibbs, 2013). In comparison the regular resources, those designated for regular teaching, have deteriorated (Ischinger, 2009; Andrén, 2013). Resources have thus been shifted from the regular day-to-day activities to activities directly or indirectly aimed towards change. Gibbs continues to use the new profession of educational developers as a proxy for this development. “In the mid 1970s educational development, which involved “perhaps 30 people in the whole of the UK, mostly part-time, has become an enormous enterprise involving thousands of people and well over £100m a year of investment” (Gibbs, 2013, p. 1). Sweden has followed this development.

Gibbs also lists the strategies for change used by educational developers over the last four decades. The list covers one and a half pages and describes activities on all levels in higher education organisations. Land (2001) supplements Gibbs’ list after having interviewed educational developers and mapped their personal orientation towards their practice. Twelve such orientations are described, some focus on the individual teachers; some on the system; some envision a need to domesticate the academic teacher in relation to the institution’s policies; while some favour a rebellious strategy where the academics ought to be liberated from institutional constraints. In combination, Gibbs and Land paint a picture where even those who are professionally engaged in the development of higher education still after four decades are uncertain of how to go about the task as a profession.

This fragmentation is not restricted to academic developers alone. It also includes those positioned as leaders and managers, at least if assessed through the literature that describes research in university management. Tight (2012) summarises this research as mainly ‘how-to literature’. Most of these are personal accounts, he reports, written by managers who construct appropriate narratives mirroring a suitable, that is, a positive self-image. In contrast, research that is “empirically based, more theorized and critical literature on this area is rather less developed” (ibid. p. 134). Again we see that the literature reveals good will and personal

engagement, but nevertheless lack a shared conceptualisation of what is to be influenced.

As we move beyond the borders of academia, external stakeholders are no better. Many are the initiatives and thrusts towards influencing higher education in what often are described as absolute necessary directions. Much less interest has been directed towards understanding the object in question: the higher education organisations. Overall, there is a pitiful deficit of knowledge about higher education organisations, especially if compared to the surplus of strong convictions claiming needs for change in various directions.

Metaphorically it can be compared to a situation where medical doctors intensely prescribe medicine to a patient, with neither a clear idea of the side effects nor of the patient as a biological system.

## Three ideals

In a systematic attempt to describe this development Stensaker (2006) assesses the process from a Norwegian perspective. By studying Norwegian higher education during the 1990s he concludes that development and change have taken place in higher education mainly through three ideals: *the bureaucratic*, *the entrepreneurial*, and *the professional*.

1) *The bureaucratic ideal* is inspired by a notion of efficiency, that is, to improve the output from invested resources. It affords power to the administrators/the administration. The organisation is seen as a machine where all parts are supposed to serve their purpose in alignment with each other. The process of production is in focus, since it is here the possible gains can be found. The language is administrative. Stensaker exemplifies with the routine of evaluation. “In a bureaucratic organisation, evaluations would be a more technocratic activity, emphasising the systematic spread of such systems, their regularity and the link to administrative and managerial decision making systems” (ibid., p. 46). Improvement is about unifying routines and implementing best practice. The underlying assumption is that the best organisation is an aligned organisation where all parts work in concert to fulfil its purpose. The purpose, on the other hand, is seldom discussed.

2) *The entrepreneurial ideal* mimics the market. Institutions are encouraged to compete with each other. Power is afforded to managers. In this type of organisation, Stensaker emphasises, “institutional leaders are expected to have the power to explore the possibilities in the ‘market’ for higher education. [. . .] Hence, work concerning quality in teaching and learning would emphasise the opinions of the ‘customers’ (students, employers, industry, or the state, etc.) of

higher education” (ibid., p. 48). Development is driven by competition. The focus is on the outcome and whether the outcome delivers value for the stakeholders. The process falls into the background as interest is targeted towards outcomes. The best organisation is an organisation that can respond quickly to emerging opportunities. The language is influenced by economy.

3) *The professional ideal* emphasises traditional academic values, such as academic freedom, expertise, and peer review. Ideas are put into practice and made available for others to assess and to be inspired by. The style of government is collegial and relies on values and traditions. The independent professional is assumed to be capable of doing a good job. Methods developed through the disciplines should guide practices. “Hence, in this organisation authority concerning the quality of teaching and learning would not follow the hierarchical but rather the informal structure, and through mechanisms such as socialisation and training. In this way, the expertise structures would not only control their own work, they would also try to control the administrative decisions that might affect them” (ibid., p. 47). This ideal affords power to those who are senior in the disciplines. The best organisation is one that relies on its disciplinary experts. The language is traditional academic.

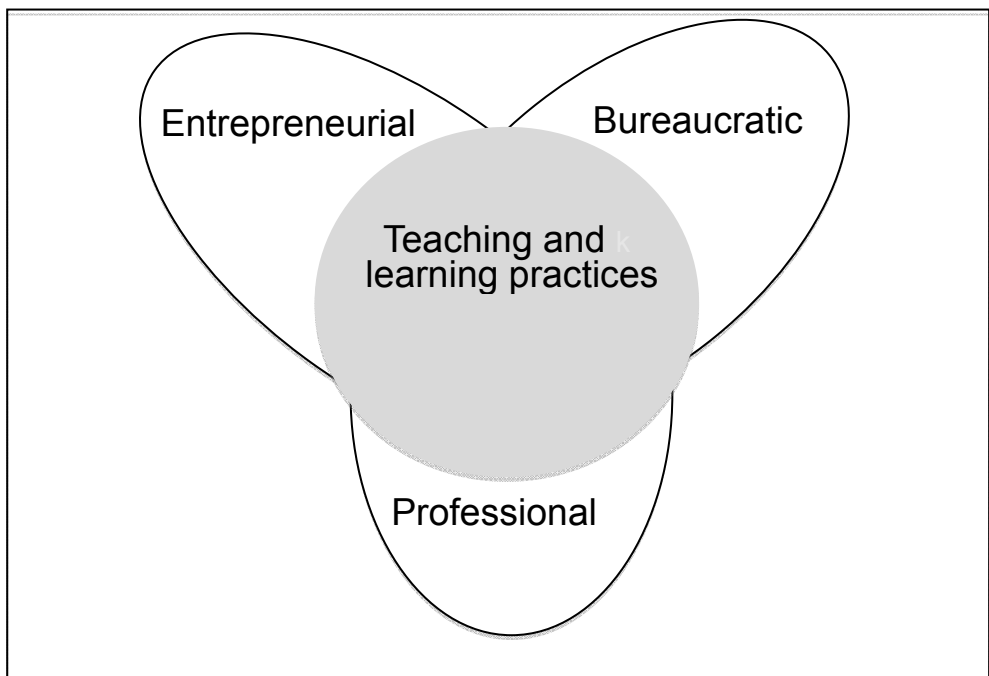
Stensaker emphasises that even though each of these ideals has supported development, it is unclear how and even if they support each other. Instead, he says, it can be argued that they compete with each other and that no learning takes place across the boundaries of the three. The result for the individual academic teacher is that he or she has to engage according to all three ideals simultaneously, as their respective dynamics result in the implementation of new routines and practices. He concludes: “Not only might this have increased the actual workload at the institutions, but it could also be seen as an indicator of what some authors have labelled the ‘demand overload’ in higher education in the 1990s” (ibid., p. 52). The term demand overload refers to a situation where various stakeholders project expectations and demands on those directly involved in the practices of higher education, e.g. academic teachers, to an extent where the sheer volume of these demands begins to threaten the quality. From the teachers point of view the efforts to fulfil externally formulated expectations compete with the efforts invested in the teaching practice.

The conclusion that recent development has generated more demands for academic teachers is mirrored by Tight (2010) in a compilation of studies assessing workload for academics in the English speaking world. He concludes that the total number of working hours per week grew from 40 hours per week in the early 1960s to about 50 hours per week in 1994. The amount of administrative work has risen from 11% of the workload in 1961 to 33% in 1994. The growth in academic administration, he states, “reflects the decreasing trust in academics on their part of their key funder, the state; yet, paradoxically, the increasing amount

of time spent on it [administration] threatens the quality of the teaching and research it is meant to protect” (ibid., p. 214).

Tight’s results are mirrored in a Swedish study (HSV, 2008). The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education reports from an extensive study on working conditions for Swedish academic teachers. Two aspects of academic life stand out as occupying a larger proportion than before, according to the academic teachers. Reporting, documenting and engaging in various kinds of evaluations is one. The second is the economification of every aspect of the job. In addition, the report states that working “conditions are unstable, the job becomes fragmented, and planning short sighted. Everything becomes a reaction to something else. [. . .] Frequent reorganisations contribute to unstable departments and difficulty to plan the work” (ibid., p. 9 author’s translation). Thus, the ‘demand overload’ put forward by Stensaker appears to be a fact according to these two reports as well.

The increased demands resulting from the unfolding dynamics of the three ideals are illustrated in Figure 1. The grey area indicates the field of tension where the three ideals introduced by Stensaker interact, that is, the area where academic teachers are situated. It is here academic teachers have to perform their teaching regardless increasing demands that originate from sometimes contradictory ideals.



**Figure 1.** The three ideals concerned with change in higher education (Stensaker, 2006). The grey area illustrates the field of tension where the teaching practitioners are active.

The interpretation made here, supported by Stensaker's account, is that the demand overload and related experiences of stress are caused by the fact that dynamics following several ideals are in play simultaneously. Uncoordinated as they are, they push for new practices and routines independently of each other. From the practitioners' point of view the situation results in *demand overload*.

## The practitioners' perspective

The problematic situation described above presents itself as an opportunity to investigate the processes that stabilise the teaching and learning practices in higher education organisations. That is, to clarify why the demand overload has not already destroyed higher education, or alternatively, why the activities resulting from the three ideals have not resulted in more change than what can be observed. Preferably, this is best examined from the perspective of academic teachers; not by merely victimising them, but instead projecting them as knowledgeable individuals forming beliefs, ideas, and practice based on what they perceive.

In this line of thinking, Crawford (2010) interviewed 36 academics to find out what they considered to be the main influences on their behaviours and attitudes towards future professional development. Emerging as less important, according to these academics, are institutional policies or national surveys and quality audits. Instead, two things are emphasised. First, the opportunity to be a knowledgeable agent, to be able to "make autonomous decisions about the direction of their development" (ibid., p. 198). Second, the personal networks and the socio-cultural contexts they operate in. Twenty-nine of the interviewees referred to the importance of personal networks. Often these were disciplinary networks, frequently extra-institutional in nature; but they were also intra-institutional networks, teams or communities of practice.

Thus, in Crawford's sample two things are emphasised: 1) the capacity to make decisions based on personal deliberation, and 2) interaction with colleagues in workgroups and personal networks. This perspective resonates with what Henkel concludes in a much-quoted analysis of European reform efforts in higher education: "Across our higher education reform study, the two things that emerged as most important for academic identities were the discipline and academic freedom. They were in many cases the sources of meaning and self-esteem, as well as being what was most valued" (Henkel, 2005, p. 166). Again it is asserted that the two things most important for academics are: the freedom to make personal choices and the collegial working context.

What is ambivalent though, in both Crawford's and Henkel's conclusions, is to what extent the two aspects refer to teaching or to research. Crawford asserts that networks and teams in relation to teaching are more pragmatic and open to

external influence while the research networks are more collegiate. Henkel does not make this distinction but argues that it is seniors in research communities that have managed to maintain stability, a claim also supported by Ylijoki (2008).

However, the same pattern does surface in relation to teaching in a survey distributed to the teaching staff in the largest faculty at the research-intensive university to which this thesis relates (Wendel, 2011). 450 teachers received the survey and 231 answered. Like Crawford's respondents these teachers, besides the interaction with students, rank the local teaching team to be the most important source for support in their role as teachers. While asked about how satisfied they are with the support, personal networks emerge as the most satisfying factor followed by the teaching team. Clearly colleagues that teachers interact with on a day-to-day basis, and/or share teaching responsibilities with are important for the maintenance and development of teaching. In all these reports academic teachers turn to collegial networks and workgroups for the maintenance and development of teaching and for ideas about teaching.

## Position in higher education research

This thesis associates itself with three of the eight areas in higher education research identified by Tight (2012). It relates to research on *academic work*, that is, how working conditions have changed over time. It especially focuses on how academics work together. The thesis also relates to research on *teaching and student learning*. Even though this area is not problematised, it is the foundation for the problem formulated. The implicit assumption is that the demand overload threatens to damage academic teaching and thereby its ability to support student learning and personal development. Last and most central is the area of *institutional leadership and governance*. The core reflections presented deal with how higher education organisations can be perceived if collegial interactions are foundational. The thesis is thus intended for those interested in leadership and governance of institutions, schools, faculties, and departments, but also for those professionally engaged in the development of academic teaching.

The purpose is to contribute to theory, and this most clearly applies to the area of institutional leadership and governance. This type of research has traditionally focused on leaders and on the introduction of New Public Management in large parts of higher education (ibid.). This thesis, however, follows Alvesson and Spicer's (2011) recommendation that more research in the area of leadership should be concerned with the followers, or, as it has been formulated, those being actively engaged in 'followership' (Billot et al. 2013). The way this is done here is to focus on the mid-level in the organisation, that is, the level where members of the organisation continuously construct meaning and subsequent traditions,

beliefs, and identities through their academic work. In short, the discussion deals mainly with the organisation as a culture (Alvesson, 2002; Schein, 2004; Van Maanen, 2007; Ancona et al. 2009) and the ambition is to contribute to a better understanding of higher education organisations and that this contribution in the long run can improve the organisations' ability to govern and lead itself and to support student learning and personal development.

Consequently, large areas of higher education research are not touched upon. For example, even though policies influence the environment in which academic teachers are active, these are left in the background. To the same area belongs research on quality issues and curriculum and course design. The fact that these and other topics are not commented upon here has more to do with the perspective chosen than assumptions of what is and what is not important in general. To understand higher education as a system, all pieces are necessary, not only as areas in their own rights, but as parts of a system where the different areas interact. The ambition here is to focus on one piece in this wider puzzle.

## The research context

The higher education organisation making up the context of this research is a research-intensive Swedish university, repeatedly ranked among the top 100 in Times Higher Education World University Ranking. The university is 350 years old and comprises eight faculties, 47,000 students of which 5,600 are international students, and 3,100 doctoral students of whom a majority teach. The university has 7,200 employees (Lund University, 2014).

Research is generally seen as the most prestigious practice within the university. The culture is best described as traditional academic in the sense that belonging to a discipline and being engaged in disciplinary research are the most important building blocks in the professional identity. Its vision, as formulated in the current strategic plan is to be a “world-class university that works to understand, explain and improve our world and the human condition” (Lund University, 2012, p 2) In recent years an increasing emphasis has been placed on innovation and close corporation with societal institutions. The university likes to describe itself as a connected university with the ambition to contribute positively to local and global societal development.

The university has employed educational developers since 1969 (Åkesson & Falk Nilsson, 2010). Currently, three centres for educational development are in operation (one at the Faculty of Engineering, one in the Faculty of Medicine, and one servicing the other faculties). In total they employ 22 full-time equivalents of personnel (Lindström & Maurits, 2014). The university has gained a national (and international) reputation for being innovative in this area in the last decades.

## The purpose of this thesis

This thesis relates to the discussion above that emphasises collegial networks and workgroups. It suggests that the various stakeholders' attempts to influence higher education and the threatening demand overload which accompanies it, are buffered by a teaching reality constructed and maintained in the process of interaction in teams and personal networks. Therefore, either the ambition for those engaged is to change higher education or to maintain important values, competences, and practices; this is where the key lies.

The purpose of the thesis is to explore how to conceptualise higher education organisations through such a perspective. The appended papers build on the perception that close colleagues, teaching teams, and personal networks are important for teachers' day-to-day practices. The aim is to apply these insights from an organisational perspective while exploring the underlying research question: *how should higher education organisations be conceptualised if these collegial interactions are essential?*

The focus is on socio-culturally formed collegial contexts within the mid-level of these organisations where a collegial context is defined as colleagues sharing a space over a period of time.

Specific questions pursued are:

- What does a system of collegial contexts look like?
- How do academic teachers who share collegial contexts share experiences from teaching with each other through strong ties, and how do they share them with other collegial contexts through weak ties?
- How do collegial contexts react to external influence, that is, to attempts to influence them through policy?
- Who do academic teachers have sincere conversations with about their teaching and what signifies these interactions? How do the numbers of conversational partners relate to how the teachers perceive their local working context?
- How do the effects from pedagogical courses propagate in higher education organisations? What can this tell us about collegial contexts?
- Which design principles are useful when identifying and/or comparing collegial contexts?





# Theoretical framework

*This section presents elements of a socio-cultural perspective on organisations in general but with examples from higher education research. The aim is to construct a foundation for an inquiry into the meaning and importance of socio-culturally formed collegial contexts. It composes the initial move into the mid-level of higher education organisations.*

## Organisation as culture

Van Maanen (2007) suggests, as further developed in Ancona (2009), three lenses through which organisations can be observed: the cultural, the political, and the designed (or formal) organisation.

The last lens reveals how the organisation is intended to function. Here formal hierarchies and roles become visible and processes emerge concerning budget, reporting and information flow. Through the political lens, next, an alternative organisational reality presents itself. Here alliances are formed as they fight for power and influence. Various stakeholders compete with each other to position themselves as influential while agendas for the future are discussed or the control of resources is at stake. The cultural lens, lastly, focuses on everyday meaning making and interaction between the individuals who together form the organisation. Over time, traditions are formed and so are mechanisms for monitoring emotions and interactions.

Van Maanen and his associates assert that in order to get a full picture of an organisation, all three lenses have to be applied. However, when carrying out analytical work it can be advantageous to distinguish between the three. In this vein, this study takes a cultural perspective on organisations. The cultural lens is pursued here not because it is more important than the other two, but because the focus is on collegial interactions.

Furthermore, while focusing on cultural processes as important in higher education organisation, this study follows Alvesson (2002) in his emphasis on culture as something the organisation is, rather than has. The latter implies that culture is something external to other processes inside the organisation and therefore can be controlled and changed in the same way as the formal

organisation can be redesigned. Alvesson advises against such a perspective, especially if the members of the organisations are to be maintained as agents, rather than passive objects instrumentally influenced by a specific culture. (The relationship between individuals and culture will be further discussed below.) Considering the fact that we focus on academic teachers, trained as they are in critical thinking and the ability to formulate and defend informed standpoints, it appears self-evident that a productive perspective on culture must allow members of the organisation to maintain personal agency. Instead of being determined by the culture, academics interact with the culture at the same time as they, through their actions, continuously contribute to its construction.

## Different levels inside organisations.

Hannah and Lester (2009) discuss knowledge-intensive organisations through three levels: *the micro level*, *the meso level*, and *the macro level*. The first level reveals the individuals; the second level focuses on knowledge-centric networks; and the third level shows the management level as it handles external communication and overall organisational prioritisation. The authors argue for the benefits of a multilayer perspective since it allows for individual initiatives and for the pursuit of knowledge and learning in the networks. But it still maintains an organisation's coherence by foregrounding organisational leadership (the macro level).

The perspective goes hand in hand with modern organisational research which emphasises the fact that different parts within an organisation are usually loosely coupled to each other (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Bamber et al., 2009; Eriksson-Zetterqvist et al., 2011). Through such a perspective, seemingly contradictory observations of organisational behaviour become intelligible, for instance how the macro level can present the organisation in one way while other parts act differently, as if they were unaware of the macro level's standpoints. Even though this misalignment might at first appear problematic, it has advantages. For example, it allows for individuals as well as for networks to pursue and refine ideas and practices as they continuously interact with reality, that is, the reality perceived by them. Such a perspective can thus encourage innovation and learning in one part of the organisation without constraining the rest of the organisation to adapt and change every time something new emerges.

According to Hannah and Lester (2009), this is why the perspective using three levels is especially suitable for knowledge-intensive organisations. Learning and innovation can be pursued at any time whenever opportunities emerge. To allow for this, a loosely coupled organisation is in fact necessary. In other types of organisations, for example an industrial plant producing cars, the assembly process

demands a different level of discipline from the members and a specified predictability in the unfolding events. If one part changes, other parts have to adapt. This means that to be loosely coupled is a necessary condition for knowledge-intensive organisations effectiveness; it is an asset, *as long as the meso level functions well*. Thus, in addition to allowing for innovation such a perspective calls for an improved understanding of the organisational meso level.

The danger for the organisation is to be loosely coupled to an extent where it is partitioned (Granovetter, 1973). This happens when different organisational units are separated from each other to such an extent that coordination is entirely impossible, when resources cannot be reallocated, and where the organisation is unable to respond to external pressure. If that is the case, the demands formulated externally will most likely make a greater impact on the respective practices than if the organisation is efficiently loosely coupled.

However, before we move into the studies conducted, a conceptualisation is needed of the institutionalised processes that influence individuals' behaviour in the meso level. How are individual academic teachers influenced by a culturally formed collegial context? This somewhat collective perspective becomes even more important because of the often historically maintained image that academics position themselves strongly as *individuals*. In the perspective proposed in this thesis, they are individuals while acting on the micro level in the organisation, but while acting on the meso level they become dependent on and influenced by norms, institutionalised in networks, workgroups, and other social settings they attach (or want to attach) themselves to or are assigned to. The major purpose of this chapter is to clarify these aspects of the meso level.

## Local norms influencing individual teachers

Ever since Durkheim, the founder of Sociology, it is clear that social activities become institutionalised and thereby influence the individual's behaviour (Aron, 1982). While discussing such processes, Ostrom speaks about norms crafted by individuals in order to deal with specific situations; how these norms function as rules within social contexts. The norms are shaped "as problem-solving individuals interact trying to figure out how to do a better job in the future than they have done in the past" (Ostrom, 2005, p. 19). It is clear, therefore, that the individuals construct norms as a consequence of how they themselves make sense of things. Ostrom further makes the point that the individuals sharing a situation often inherently understand how the norms applied in the situation should be interpreted, and that norms therefore do not have to be in writing. This is further emphasised by Wenger (1999) who argues that written rules lose their elasticity and thereby become less adaptable to new situations in which they have to be

applied. Norms inherent in the community, naturally understood by the individuals, allow for improvisation, creativity, and innovation that written rules cannot. In the following, the definition of norms follows the one suggested by Ostrom. Norms are “shared concepts of what must, must not, or may be appropriate actions or outcomes in particular types of situations” (Ostrom 2005, p. 112). The norms therefore function as handrails for individuals while acting inside collegial contexts. They support practices and constrain them simultaneously. Each collegial context thus has a slightly different handrail than the other contexts.

The above takes as a starting point that individuals sharing a social context do institutionalise their practice in the form of norms, which might or might not be in writing. These norms, if they work productively, may support development of the practice at hand as well as secure the level of quality that is already achieved. It is, however, also clear that these norms, once institutionalised, appear for the individuals as facts, as a part of their objective reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Consequently, they can also hamper innovation and development.

A special case is how norms appear for newcomers, those individuals who were not present when the norms were developed. Jawitz (2009) illustrates this in a study of how recently employed young academics learn to assess and mark students in three locally established academic contexts in a South African university. The study is an account of how young academics learn to master and internalise the norms of three local teaching communities.

The first context provides a routine where two academics independently mark students’ course work without communicating with each other. The results are then compared. If the two markers differ in their opinion, a third marker is assigned to make the final decision, still without talking to the other two. “The initial discomfort evident amongst new academics with the lack of agreed criteria for assessing student performance eventually gave way to an acceptance that individuals could mark in any way they pleased” (ibid., p. 609). Jawitz continues: “Newcomers soon stopped searching for a collective set of rules and criteria for marking” (ibid., p. 609). Eventually the new academics become comfortable with marking course work within this specific academic context and thus no longer ask for criteria. This illustrates how they now have become socialised into the local community, and into how marking is traditionally done. They have internalised the local norms.

In a second context one young academic and one senior colleague first mark separately and later compare their results. If they differ more than 10% in their marking, they start a negotiating process to reach a final decision. “These negotiations often highlighted the power relations between senior and junior academics. The fear of having to defend one’s mark against that of an experienced colleague had a significant impact on how new academics marked.” (ibid., p. 607).

The process functions as a way of moulding the newcomer into becoming ‘one of us’.

In a third context, young academics are invited into an ongoing and open discussion about how to assess students. Multiple situations where seniors assess and openly discuss the students’ performance “provided new academics and students with regular access to the discourse of judging performance, and opportunities to observe and listen until they felt ready to contribute” (ibid., p. 611). The young academics in this context do not describe the emotional tension described by those in the other two communities. Jawitz views them as legitimate peripheral participants of this community of practice, a term explicitly borrowed from Wenger (1999).

Jawitz’ report displays not only the unease felt by many young academics as they enter into established traditions, but also how they after some time of practice develop a capacity aligned with the local norms and how this capacity over time becomes tacit. They themselves may become future guardians of the norms specific for their respective academic context. In addition, Jawitz convincingly displays the variation between the three higher education contexts he studied, emphasising the variation among teaching communities in higher education; a perspective that resonates with the loosely coupled collegial contexts described above.

## Norms and individuals

The relationship between institutionalised norms and the individual agent’s personal freedom has been debated in sociology for as long as the discipline has existed. In an attempt to suggest a solution Giddens (2004) formulates the idea of ‘structuration’. Here the individual is seen as a knowledgeable agent who can use his or her freedom to act. However, due to the difficulties of assessing the long-term outcomes of an action, the cognitive resources of the individual will be overrun by the complexity of the situation at hand. Therefore the individual will either act according to the expectations inherent in the situation or, occasionally, object to them, an action that may or may not change the norms. The overall result is that individuals do act as knowledgeable agents but simultaneously they are influenced by and also co-construct the structures.

Giddens’ perspective suggests that individuals always have some freedom, despite the pressure the situation subjects them to. This freedom was further illustrated by Goffman (1973) when he studied patients in an American mental hospital during the late 1950s. He described the hospital as a total institution, a place where individuals seemingly were under total control. What he found, though, was that the inmates still managed to retain some individual freedom: There were zones in

the building, there were aspects of clothing, et cetera, where the individuals managed to maintain opportunities to express individuality and personal agency. They developed ways of behaving where they acted according to the rules when being watched in the open, and acted in more relaxed ways when they were with people they trusted. Using a theatre metaphor to describe this, Goffmann distinguishes between frontstage behaviour and backstage behaviour (Goffmann, 2000). Different norms guide backstage behaviour in interactions with those that are trusted, allowing for less edited behaviour, than the norms guiding frontstage behaviour where the individual is under surveillance.

Hence, and as made clear by Goffmann, it is highly unlikely that the kind of norms illustrated by Jawitz controls an individual totally. On the other hand, individuals cannot escape them. They have to relate to them, and in the long run, as explained by Giddens, true revolutionaries, those who totally change the norms are rare. Most of the time the members of a socially controlled context will be influenced and more or less behave according to the norms in place.

The way academics adapt to socially constructed norms have been portrayed from ethnographic perspectives. Bloch (2008) for example shows how academics in a lunchroom at a Danish university department construct a style of conversation favouring some academics and their interests (including research interests) while other colleagues are diminished and left in the periphery. Bloch convincingly shows how the norms influence not only what is talked about, but also how the talk is performed, including a normalised level of emotional tension. Ehn and Löfgren (2007) focus on the seminar and how different variants have been institutionalised in different organisational contexts. Some of the seminars described are effective and supportive of learning, some are dysfunctional and personally destructive for participants. In a longitudinal study Edvardsson-Stiwne (2009) describes how institutionalised conceptions of being the elite in a Swedish university govern the ongoing development of a study programme. She emphasises how academic teachers as well as students collectively maintain these conceptions and how this in turn influences what is possible or not possible to do. Edvardsson-Stiwne thus illustrates how institutionalised norms stabilise an educational programme and limit what is possible to change.

These examples from the literature demonstrate that institutionalised norms also guide individuals in higher education and that the influence is linked to practices as well as to aspects of inter-collegial relationships.

## The temporal aspect

A much-used theoretical framework in higher education research is *Communities of Practice*. According to Wenger, communities of practice are “groups of people

who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). He uses the term *enterprise* to indicate the direction of and the object for the concern or passion. The members continuously pursue their enterprise. Over time the pursuit creates a *history of learning*. Things being done become part of the community’s collective memory and form building blocks for members to use while they continue to pursue the enterprise.

Wenger’s perspective introduces a temporal aspect to the processes we have focused upon so far. Members sharing a context thus construct their shared future as well as history. Consequently, the shared history of learning is not an actual chain of events. Instead it consists of descriptions, anecdotes and stories about events that members chose to tell about their shared history. It is an actively constructed history. Or, to use a term from Clark (1998; 2009), it is the *saga* the members chose to remember. Clark borrows the term from the Icelandic saga, because of its similar function. The references to the local history as the members remember it fulfil the purpose of holding the community together and of further highlighting the pursuit of an enterprise. The saga offers meaning to past events and stabilises the direction for the future. Over time the saga becomes incorporated into symbols and rituals and thereby becomes detached from the context where it first appeared. Various aspects of the saga gain status as objective parts of reality.

Over time this temporal aspect causes considerable variation to emerge in the landscape of higher education and academia in general; a variation described in the literature as *tribes and territories* (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

Harvey and Stensaker (2008) discuss how various workgroups in higher education may view and deal with external pressure. They highlight the variation in how groups experience the organisational and societal context in which they are placed, and how this variation relates to the inner structure of these groups. The results contribute to a better understanding of how change initiatives in higher education organisations play out differently because of the inner normative structure of the groups inhabiting the meso level. Consequently, as argued by Harvey and Stensaker (2008), and also by Bamber et al. (2009), it is an oversimplification to view policies and other ways applied to influence the meso level of the organisation as a one-way process. Rather, such a process is an interaction where both the management on the macro level as well as the local workgroups and networks inhabiting the meso level are active. The workgroups and networks *chose* to engage and thereby contribute to the outcome of actions taken by management on the macro level.



## Boundaries, identities and external pressure

A recurrent stream from this socio-cultural research is *belonging*. The cultural aspects of the processes described above create more or less distinct boundaries according to which memberships can be decided (Wenger, 1999). In turn, such processes have impact on identities, status, hierarchies, and power. People become someone by belonging to a specific community and through their status inside the community. Consequently, if the norms influencing ideas and behaviours inside the community are to change, it would affect the individuals' perceptions of themselves and their positions inside the hierarchy of the community. Change in the practice of a community is therefore linked through the norms to identities, a fact that partly explains the resilience to external pressure. Change implies a change in the perception of who I am.

Outside the boundary, or more correctly, in conjunction with the boundary, lies the periphery (*ibid.*). It is an area where the members of a community can interact with newcomers. Students can for instance be defined as legitimate peripheral participants. They are members, but without full membership. The periphery is also an area where exchange with other communities can take place.

## Summarising the introduction of socio-cultural aspects

The research touched upon above strengthens the assumption that socio-cultural processes within the organisational meso level can and indeed does influence not only organisational members in general but also academic teachers in higher education organisations in specific. The influence is mediated through norms constructed and maintained by the members as they interact. It has also been pointed out that these norms are to a large extent dependent on the experiences gained by the members of a collegial context. Norms do not emerge in a haphazardous fashion but rather as members adapt them according to the needs they perceive the situation presents to them. Over time these processes create a sense of belonging, boundaries, and the ensuing effects on professional identity. They also support the emergence of traditions and collective memories formulated as a saga.

In what follows, these aspects are applied in the appended papers. The aim is to close in on the meso level through a socio-cultural perspective and to reveal patterns with the potential to increase the collective understanding of higher education organisations. While doing this, collegial contexts, distinguishable by various norms, will be given special attention.

# Methods

*The overarching assumption in the thesis is that collegial interaction and subsequent socio-culturally formed collegial contexts are important to understand in a study of higher education organisations. The methodological challenge therefore is to further investigate this assumption and suggest if not an integrated perspective, at least elements of knowledge which can further our understanding of higher education organisations.*

*To achieve this, a series of methods were applied. These are described below in relation to respective papers.*

## Scientific orientation

There is no coherent theory which describes higher education organisations, especially not through a cultural perspective (Tight, 2012). Scholars have contributed but the result is still far from conclusive. Thus, the approach taken in this investigation is not, and can hardly be, truly *deductive*. This would be problematic due to the limitation of existing theory. On the other hand, elements of theory do exist. Therefore *inductive* methods, such as grounded theory, may run the risk of not making sufficient use of the theoretical elements that do in fact exist. Due to this, the approach taken is *abductive*, as the investigation is positioned in the early state in a wider process of theory construction (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2014a). Its value lies in the ability to add to this process. Its value also lies in its ability to inspire new investigations rather than in its ability to make final claims. Having said this, it is important to keep in mind that these deliberations are always open for critique. Theory is usually always in the making and various schools make claims about their respective validity. Thus, the positioning of this thesis is rather an attempt to find one methodological orientation than to rule out other alternatives.

## Methods used

The methods used do not belong to any specific school or tradition. The outcome of this variation, however, fulfils the purpose of triangulation. It discerns aspects of the same phenomenon through the various methods used.

That said, the methods chosen resemble each other in some but important ways. For example, as illustrated in the previous chapter on theoretical framework, the overarching perspective is that the socio-cultural methods chosen allow respondents to tell their story, either through interviews or through narratives. The ethnographically inspired methods used, such as a case study, should be seen as a way of revealing the element of reality as constructed by the subjects being studied. In this, the methods chosen follow Giddens' idea about structuration (Giddens. 2004). People do act as knowledgeable agents. They construct their world together. But this fact does not overrun existing structures and their impact on the particular individuals. Rather it is the interaction between the subjects and the structures that constitutes the construction of reality.

Another pattern is a preference for qualitative over quantitative methods. This is partly a consequence of the overarching purpose of generating inspiration for development of theory, but also, as touched upon above, the difficulties in using quantitative methods in an area lacking a well-defined theoretical understanding.

The description of methods used is linked to each appended paper. Through this, the methods avoid being detached from their use. Further, it is not always possible to separate the method used from the research question and results since as argued by Van Maanen (1998), qualitative research is often (re)designed as it is being carried out. Emerging results may influence decisions concerning the methods chosen.

### **Paper I**

Paper I investigates how culturally formed collegial contexts or microcultures (strong in teaching and research) within the organisational meso level interact with policies used by management for governing purposes. The empirical material is from a previously published case study (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2011/2013), which is a multi-case study (Yin, 2009) and is also used in Paper VI; the method is presented here.

Step 1: Following Yin (2009) a tentative model was constructed through extensive use of literature. This model was then used during the selection phase, the phase when questions were generated, the phase when informants were interviewed, and during the analysis and writing process.

Step 2: The five collegial contexts were selected from three different faculties in the university, three faculties that the researchers have been active in as academic developers for more than a decade. The selection process started by asking deans, vice-deans, heads of departments and teaching committees (11 people in total), as well as student representatives, to identify successful academically strong microcultures.

Step 3: Results from step 2 were triangulated with documented results from internal and external national quality assurance evaluations as well as with the researchers' personal experience from working in the faculties. Five contexts were selected based on the following conditions:

- Strong in teaching and in research (the latter as defined by an external research assessment exercise conducted three years earlier).
- Teaching activities at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
- A fairly large number of members (minimum of 10) as well as of students per year (range from 150 to 1000).

Step 4: After selection, each collegial context was approached and asked if its members were willing to participate in the study. All accepted. Next, semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded, and fully transcribed. Five individual academics were interviewed in each context. The interviewees were leaders, seniors, and junior academics. Students were interviewed as a focus group within each microculture. These students were not beginners, but students that had at some point decided to continue to study at this particular microculture. Altogether 45 people were interviewed: 17 academics (since doctoral students do teach, they were included as junior academics) and 28 students. All staff interviews in each context were completed before interviewing the students. Interview questions concerned internal issues such as group values and teaching practices, decision-making processes, group history, improvements and developments, as well as collaborations outside the microculture, relations to formal, organisational structures and so on.

All interviews were documented in two ways. They were all recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were also summarised into a study protocol immediately after the interview: Both researchers independently summarised their impressions from the interview and synthesised these summaries into one study protocol, a procedure adding to the reliability of the final report (Yin, 2009, p. 41).

The interviewees were all individuals who in various ways had decided to remain inside the microcultures. A deliberate decision was taken not to interview those who had left. This was because the aim was to study how high quality microcultures in higher education function and how this was described from the inside.

Because of time constraints, all five collegial contexts were sent the final report (instead of a draft version, which would have been preferable) and invited to comment upon it.

Step 5: The report was written as a thick description where research reflections were presented alongside descriptions of observations.

## **Paper II**

This paper uses an abductive approach (Lipton, 2004; Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2008; Persson and Sahlin 2013) and aims to uncover structures within a higher education organisation by the use of network research, and to construct a conceptual understanding of how teachers' experiences from teaching *may* flow in the organisation.

The procedure follows Alvesson and Spicer's (2011) and Alvesson and Sköldbberg's (2008) emphasis on metaphors as a means to reveal previously hidden and potentially important aspects of certain phenomena in organisational research.

Step 1. The organisational culture in an academic setting was summarised as continuously constructed through day-to-day interaction by the members of the culture.

Step 2. Aspects revealed in network research were summarised and formulated as a small number of metaphors (clusters, weak and strong ties, and hubs).

Step 3. The metaphors from network research were then, so to say, placed on top of the described aspects of the culture described.

The results from step 3 reveals a visualisation of organisational culture and specifically the interactions crucial for its maintenance. The visualisation is based on the cluster, strong ties, and weak ties metaphors. The clusters metaphorically resemble collegial contexts in which colleagues interact through strong ties, et cetera. One important aspect concerns the qualitative differences between strong and weak ties and their potential link to (generalised) trust (Rothstein, 2011).

Step 4. The evolving understanding of how interaction inside a higher education culture might take place was tested through a single narrative formulated by an academic teacher. The narrative thus pilot-tested the metaphors' explanatory potential.

### **Paper III**

In this paper the visualisation made in Paper II is tested as it focuses on teachers interacting with each other inside and across the borders of local working contexts, where the content of these interactions is teaching and learning experiences.

The material for this study was gathered during a series of interviews with 15 academic teachers in a faculty of engineering. The interviews (carried out in English) took place in a location chosen by the interviewees and were centred on experiences of teaching in English, a second language for the teachers and for the majority of their students. The interviews lasted for 30 to 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviewer was a person not previously known to the interviewees.

The interviews were aimed at revealing narratives describing specific events and episodes during teaching. It was assumed that such narratives, being centred on a person or a group, and having a dramatic structure would constitute a package of experiences robust enough to be told and retold by many people. They would, as described by Schein (2004) be equal to cultural artefacts. As such they could be told, listened to and told again by various people, like in the children's game Chinese whispers. This is an assumption also supported in the literature (Martin, et al. 1983; Fairhurst, 2007).

The analysis took place in three steps. First, the researchers analysed the transcripts and identified relevant narratives, independently and then together. Second, the narratives identified were put in relation to the interview material to see whether the narratives were discussed with colleagues inside the interviewee's working context. Third, the material was analysed again to see whether it revealed evidence that the interviewee could recount narratives originating in working contexts outside his or her working context. If so, it was assumed, the narratives had 'travelled' across the borders of collegial contexts.

### **Paper IV**

This paper continues to investigate the patterns of interaction between academic teachers, this time with a special interest for qualitative variations in such interactions. The interest relates to the visualisation in Paper II. It had already been shown (Becher & Trowler 2001) that academic researchers normally rely on a small network of people (up to 12 individuals) where initial ideas are discussed, first drafts read, critiqued, et cetera. With a terminology borrowed from Berger and Luckmann (1966), these interactive partners can be described as more significant for the individual than are other individuals. Significant others, Berger and Luckmann state, "are particularly important for the ongoing confirmation of that crucial element of reality we call identity" (ibid., p. 170).

It was hypothesised that academics in their role as teachers also rely on a small number of significant others. If this assumption holds true, academic teachers' professional identities, their conceptual understanding of teaching and learning, and subsequent ideas about how to teach, view students, and other teacher-related issues would be constructed and maintained during interaction with a few significant others, that is, inside a personal *significant network*.

To test this, a number of academic teachers attending pedagogical courses were asked, during the first hours of the course, to fill out a small survey. Before the survey, the participants were oriented about Handal's concept of *critical friends* (Handal, 1999) as a way to focus the respondents on individuals with whom they had sincere and serious discussions about teaching and learning.

109 respondents from various faculties in the university answered the following questions.

- a) With how many people do you have engaging conversations about teaching and learning?
- b) Where are these conversational partners found?
- c) What characterises your conversations? (Please describe them.)
- d) Later during the data collection the following question was added (answered by 47 respondents):
- e) Do you consider your local professional culture to be supportive or non-supportive of such conversations about teaching and learning?

Answers to a) and b) were analysed descriptively in a first step. The second step put the number of conversational partners in relation to whether the respondents found their working context supportive to these types of conversations or not.

The result confirmed the hypothesis that teachers have sincere conversations with a small number of significant others. The answer to question d) could now be related to the answer to questions a) and b). A direct relationship was found between the perceived culture and the number of conversational partners. The more supportive the culture was perceived to be, the more conversational partners the respondent reported.

The answers to question c) were formulated as narratives describing the conversations and their contexts. The narratives were analysed in two dimensions, one chronological and one non-chronological. The former describes what took place, while the latter was centred on meaning, that is, what aspects in the story (told or not told) appear to be more meaningful than other aspects (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2008, p. 257).

The first dimension revealed the content and the contexts of such conversations. For example, it showed that when another and less significant person enters the

scene, the conversational pattern changes immediately. When this person leaves, the pattern changes back again.

The second dimension in the analysis discerns an alternative structure based on meaning rather than the chronology and dramaturgy of the narrative. This step in the analysis revealed that some aspects (for example trust) appeared to be prerequisites to other aspects.

## **Paper V**

This paper is again abductive in its approach (Lipton, 2004; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008; Persson & Sahlin, 2013). The paper presents an alternative, or more nuanced, explanation to a described problem. Again as in Paper II, the aim is to formulate testable hypotheses, which in turn might reveal more aspects of the phenomenon in question.

The phenomenon relates to a widely discussed problem among educational developers: What can explain the fact that effects from pedagogical courses offered to academic teachers do not seem to influence a wider organisational context, despite the documented effect they have on the individual teachers who participate in such courses?

After an initial literature review it was concluded that the widely accepted explanation is that socially constructed values and beliefs held by colleagues and managers counteract the values, ideas, and innovative practices introduced through the pedagogical courses. Enthused teachers are often brought back to 'reality' by the lack of interest or even hostility expressed by colleagues and/or academic leaders.

At this stage a question is formulated: What constitutes this social domain in higher education where these effects take place? Through the use of *Inference to the Best Explanation* (Lipton, 2004), it is concluded that two out of four suggestions (the workgroup and the significant network) have greater potential to generate testable hypotheses than the other two (the department and the discipline). Arguments for this are presented in the paper.

What follows is an abductive reasoning resulting in the preliminary hypothesis, which is summarised here: Conceptual effects in organisations are more likely to appear through the significant networks, while effects on teaching practices (which have to be materialised frontstage) emerge through the workgroups. Effects are therefore likely to propagate in the significant networks before they appear in the workgroups.



## **Paper VI**

Here it is argued that the collegial contexts (called microcultures) described in the case study also used in Paper I can be compared to a framework developed around *commons* or *limited resource pools* (Ostrom, 1990; Janssen et al., 2010; Hess & Ostrom, 2011; Volland & Ostrom, 2010). The aim of the paper is twofold: 1) to emphasise the collective nature of the collegial contexts and how academics may actively share responsibility for the working context's performance and the practices in which they are engaged, and 2) to, through the framework developed by Ostrom, highlight aspects of collegial contexts, also known as design principles. These eight principles are upheld in the various contexts by varying sets of norms. Potentially these design principles can be used in the future during research into collegial contexts in the meso level of higher education organisations.

The method in this paper, thus, implies a degree of interdisciplinarity because a framework from another disciplinary context is used on material produced in higher education. It is not uncommon to do this (Tight 2012), but still potentially problematic; an issue which is pursued in the discussion-section of this thesis.

# Summary of appended papers

## Papers summarised

In the following the papers are summarised one after the other. An even denser overview is presented at the end of this chapter in table 1.

### Paper I

Mårtensson, K., Roxå, T. and Stensaker, B. (2012). From Quality Assurance to Quality Practices: An investigation of strong microcultures in teaching and learning. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-12, iFirst Article.

In this paper five *strong microcultures* are investigated in terms of their relationship to a faculty-wide quality assurance policy. The policy was part of the European Bologna Process aimed at unifying higher education in Europe. The investigation focused on the relation between the values, traditions, and practices of the specific microcultures and the policy at hand. In other words: *How does the policy in question interact with the microcultures studied?*

The policy in question required all syllabi to be re-written according to a given formula. It introduced ‘learning outcomes’ and ‘constructive alignment’ (Biggs & Tang, 2007) in the organisation and, as already stated, was part of a national and international attempt to influence higher education.

The immediate result was that strong microcultures could be identified and studied. Further results showed that the microcultures found it natural to interpret the policy from their own point of view. They took an agentic stance towards the policy. The five microcultures studied responded in different way: some engaged intensely while others remained passive and did what was asked, but without any intention of letting it further influence their views or practices. No unit opposed the new routines entirely. The interviewees explained the specific microculture’s reaction by relating it to the respective enterprise. If the intentions of the policy and the enterprise coincided, the microculture engaged; if not the microculture remained passive. This active relationship with the policy strengthened the impression that the microcultures not only reacted to the policy and initiatives

taken by management, but were also able to coordinate themselves internally in relation to the enterprise they envisioned.

Another related result was that teaching clearly came across as being an important part of the normative structure. It was also considered to have a close relationship with research practice, one that was almost intertwined and inseparable. It can thus be claimed that in the microcultures studied, the enterprise was a composite of both teaching and research. It was clear that the microcultures related to the formal management of the faculty, but also to professional networks, research networks, and alumni. The microcultures used these relationships to balance their various commitments. It was additionally clear that they wanted to balance these sources of influence themselves without interference from the outside.

It is clear that these microcultures found it natural that they themselves decide the level of engagement during the interaction with the wider organisation in general and with the policy in question. The results suggest that the outcomes of these decisions are more related to the internal normative structure of the specific microculture and to the respective enterprise than to the actions taken by management.

From a wider perspective the results presented in the paper support the idea that socio-culturally formed collegial contexts in the meso level of the organisation exist and that their internal normative structures influence their role in the organisation to which they belong. It is however important to note that these microcultures were chosen because they already produced teaching and research of high quality. It is thus likely that they differ from many other forms of collegial contexts in the organisation in terms of such aspects as degree of normative integration, how various practices are balanced, and in terms of the internal interactional climate.

## **Paper II**

Roxå, T., Mårtensson K. and Alveteg, M. (2011). Understanding and Influencing Teaching and Learning Cultures at University: A network approach. *Higher Education*, 62(1): 99-111.

This mainly conceptual paper uses a cultural perspective on higher education organisations to reveal interactional patterns within such an organisational culture. Network research is used as an auxiliary framework.

Through the lens of network theory and research, the results foreground an interactional pattern where individuals interact more with some and less with others. When scaled up, it reveals a pattern of clusters signified by strong ties (dense and frequent interaction between individuals) linked to other clusters through weak ties (less dense and less frequent interaction).

The communication through the weak ties is normally not equally distributed among the members inside a cluster. Instead, specific individuals allocate more time to the weak ties than do average members. These individuals thus perform the function of *hubs* or nodes, since more information originating externally to the cluster passes through them on its way to the other members. It is their (the hubs') task to assess the relevance of this external information from the microculture's perspective.

The division of labour between members and hubs allows for members of a microculture to concentrate on the practice at hand. Through collaboration with other members, through strong ties and over time, they can develop considerable sophistication in their respective practices.

However, this sophistication does not seem to be something that emerges automatically. Rather, it appears to be related to the normative structure constructed by the members. Some clusters may develop continuously while others do not. The normative structure can thus very well be such that it counteracts the process of increased sophistication. Hence, the pattern emerging here is not normative in the sense that microcultures always produce high quality outcomes.

Weak ties are important for a perspective that includes several interacting microcultures, such as those in a higher education organisation. Depending of their strength, density, and frequency of use, they indicate how integrated or partitioned the organisation is. In a language used before in this thesis, the weak ties are interesting for anyone studying the extent to which an organisation is efficiently loosely coupled, or even if it is entirely decoupled. As already stated, to be loosely coupled may be an advantage in knowledge-intensive organisations because it allows for specific units to evolve in sophistication in relation to a complex and varying reality. On the other hand, if the distance between the units becomes entirely decoupled, the organisation becomes partitioned and loses its ability to function as an organisation. If so, the organisation not only loses its ability to coordinate or lead itself, it also becomes vulnerable to external pressure (Granovetter, 1973).

The results propose that whether a specific organisation is severely partitioned or not does not necessarily have to do with the existence of microcultures as such, but is related to the strength, density, and frequency in the use of the weak ties. Such a conceptualisation of a higher education organisation allows for both the existence of highly and increasingly sophisticated collegial contexts, specialised in their respective field, and organisational elements that counter the tendencies of becoming partitioned, that is, the weak ties. The weak ties thus present themselves as a key-element in highly functioning higher education organisations.

Lastly, the hubs – those individuals in a cluster that scan the surroundings – are more engaged in other microcultures' doings than the average member. The hubs

are a result of natural tendencies for division of labour inside the microcultures. The other members assign the task of being a hub to one or a few members. The hubs thus earn their status as hubs primarily through the other members. This renders them limited possibilities to influence the normative structure of the specific cluster. In fact, it often forces the hub to perform a balancing act between internal and external demands. This means that the hub filters external information, sometimes alien to the internal structure of the microculture, so that external pressure is balanced and is not allowed to interfere negatively with what is considered important by the other members

These processes become visible when management tightens its grip by deciding to align the organisation, that is, to decrease the variation among the microcultures as a strategy to decrease the degree of loose coupledness. If management assigns power to the hubs in this process, power that draws its resources from the management rather than from the members of the microculture, the balancing act may become even harder. It can result in a crisis for the hub. This person may even be forced to choose to either withdraw from the microculture or to withdraw from the management. Both alternatives are potentially costly in terms of status and professional identity.

### **Paper III**

Roxå, T. and Renc-Roe, J. Why Experiences Gained During Academic Teaching Fail to Support Organisational Learning in Higher Education? (Submitted to a scientific journal.)

This paper investigates whether experiences from teaching in a foreign language travel through a specific organisation, that is, if teaching experiences from one corner of the organisation reach teachers active in another corner. The specific question is: Can narratives describing teaching experiences gained by academic teachers in one collegial context be retold by teachers active in others?

With the previous paper in mind, this paper asks questions about weak ties:

1. Do teachers formulate narratives describing their teaching experiences?
2. Do they share these narratives with colleagues who share the same working context?
3. Do these narratives 'travel' through the weak ties to other clusters? In other words, to what extent does the conceptual pattern generated in the previous paper match reality?

An additional dimension incorporated in the study is the distinction between narratives and rumours. Narratives are typically centred on individuals that are identifiable and are told in a way that makes further inquiry possible. Rumours are

similar to narratives but are often accompanied by indications that no further information will or can be given. Thus, narratives may allow for further inquiry while rumours do not. This aspect is significant since even though the existence of weak ties is important, so is the quality of the information travelling through these channels. By also including rumours, the investigation capture not only whether material moved in the organisation, but also the quality of the material.

Fifteen teachers were interviewed about their experience of teaching international students in a language foreign to themselves and to a majority of their students. They were encouraged to tell stories and describe episodes that emerged from their experiences, both stories they formulated themselves and those they heard from other teachers. They were also asked whether they had told these stories to colleagues.

During the interviews, all teachers were able to formulate narratives describing specific situations of teaching and learning. However, only one out of 33 narratives originated from outside the teacher's closest collegial context. This single narrative was picked up by an interviewee during a faculty-wide teaching and learning conference. The other 32 were either narratives describing an experience the interviewee had or narratives told to him or her by a colleague. Thus, even though the narratives do exist and apparently are shared inside a collegial context, they do not travel from one context to another.

In contrast, rumours were found to travel, in line with the conceptualisation made in Paper II through weak ties. It also became clear during the interviews that narratives were sometimes deliberately translated into rumours when they were released outside the microculture.

The results support the conceptualisation of the organisation as made up of clusters and that interaction inside these clusters is richer than external interaction. It is again an argument for the existence of socio-culturally formed collegial contexts in the meso level of the organisation. Communication inside these contexts positively relates to strong ties. The overall perspective constructed in Paper II is thus supported. There seems to be a qualitative difference between the nature of communication inside (strong ties) and outside (weak ties) of the collegial context (the cluster). The weak ties emerge in the material as interactions where experiences are communicated in the format of rumours.

## **Paper IV**

Roxå, T. and Mårtensson, K. (2009). Significant Conversations and Significant Networks – Exploring the backstage of the teaching arena. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(5): 547-559.

This paper explores interactive patterns among academic teachers. The aim is to find out how many individuals an academic teacher has sincere conversations with about personal experiences gained during teaching. Following socio-cultural theory, the assumption is that during such conversations teachers construct and maintain beliefs and conceptions related to teaching and learning.

To test this, teachers attending pedagogical courses were asked to fill out a survey during the first hours of the course.

Three questions guided the investigation.

1. How many conversational partners do teachers have?
2. How can these conversations be characterised?
3. How do these conversations and the number of conversational partners relate to norms in the respondent's workplace, norms that support or counteract such conversation?

Out of 106 surveyed individuals 41% reported up to 5 conversational partners (all had at least one), 42% reported 6-10, and 17% above 11. About half of the partners were found inside the respective respondent's disciplinary community. Consequently, all respondent could distinguish between conversational partners in general and those who were more important, that is, those that were more significant to them.

Thirty-one out of 47 respondents assessed their working context as supportive to these conversations and 16 as non-supportive. Those who were active in supportive contexts reported twice as many conversational partners compared to those working in non-supportive contexts.

As for the narratives describing these situations, respondents had no problems identifying the type of conversations asked for, or describing them. Typically the narratives described conversations as providing emotional support, generating ideas, and solving problems. The conversations always took place in private, only among those trusted. The style of conversation was explicitly described as distinctly different from that used during frontstage conversations, such as during departmental meetings. The narratives collected indicate that the conversations are consensus-oriented rather than conflict-oriented. Respondents do not report having challenged their conversational partner.

On the basis of these results it is asserted that academic teachers do have important conversations with a small number of significant individuals. These few individuals constitute the academic teacher's *significant network*. The nature of these conversations makes it likely that conceptions about teaching and learning as well as teaching practices are constructed and maintained during these conversations. Changes in teaching practices, it is argued, would be linked to changes in these conversations, either that new material is added or that new

conversational partners are introduced. Assumedly, the conversations described have a distinct relation to the normative structures of the collegial contexts of which the teachers are members. These norms influence the number of conversational partners in terms of how many they are in general and how many of them are from the same discipline or working context as the respondent.

## **Paper V**

Roxå, T. and Mårtensson K. (2012). How Effects from Teacher Training of Academic Teachers Propagate into the Meso Level and Beyond. *Teacher Development in Higher Education. Existing Programs, Program Impact, and Future Trend*. E. Simon and G. Pleschova (Eds.), London, Routledge.

This paper starts from a documented phenomenon: Effects from pedagogical courses offered to academic teachers are dependent on the professional milieu in which the academic teachers are active. The question pursued is: How should we best understand the nature of these local professional milieus – collegial contexts – so that the effects or the absence of effects from pedagogical courses become intelligible? The paper compares four organisational entities: the department, the discipline, the workgroup, and the significant network.

An initial conclusion suggests that workgroups and significant networks are closer related to the propagation of effects from pedagogical courses than are departments and disciplines. Consequently, effects will emerge in workgroups and significant networks before they emerge in departments and disciplines.

Significant networks are described as consensus oriented and mainly existing backstage. Workgroups, on the other hand, operate frontstage, since they are engaged in practices, and they are to a higher extent conflictual. Due to these aspects it is argued that the effects from pedagogical courses will emerge differently in significant networks and on workgroups.

A second conclusion is that conceptual effects, that is, effects on teachers' ways of thinking, will emerge in the significant networks before they emerge in the workgroups. Effects on teaching practices will emerge in workgroups.

A third conclusion relevant for the entire investigation reported in this thesis, is thus: The collegial contexts, so far treated as more or less coherent entities, are broken up along two dimensions: the degree to which the members of a workgroup are significant to each other; and the extent to which the significant network is also a workgroup. (This result is not pursued in the paper, but in the discussion section of this thesis.)

Another aspect discussed in the paper is that some collegial contexts may be development oriented and others not. It is likely that contexts with a



developmental-orientation in relation to teaching and student learning will react differently to new ideas in teaching picked up during pedagogical courses than would a collegial context oriented towards stability.

## **Paper VI**

Roxå, T. and Mårtensson, K. Higher Education Commons – a framework for comparison of midlevel units in higher education organisations (Submitted to a scientific journal.)

This paper uses the concept strong microcultures and compares the results from the case study in Paper I. with an existing framework developed in political science. It relates the findings from strong microcultures to Ostrom's research on *commons* or *limited resource pools*. Ostrom (1990) has shown that groups of individuals can organise themselves and develop normative structures useful for productive self-governance. The paper applies the eight design principles that Ostrom has shown to be present in functioning commons to the strong academic microcultures. In doing so, *reputation* or *academic standing* is equated with a limited resource.

The paper argues that a strong reputation can be seen as a limited resource in qualitative terms. It is an asset when undergraduate students, postgraduate students, or academics are recruited. It is an asset when funding is applied for or new partners for collaboration are approached. It can also be destroyed; it has to be protected; and sanctions are potentially used once members of the microculture do not live up to the expected standards. The paper further argues that Ostrom's research has the potential to illuminate organisational design principles of self-governing microcultures, but more research is needed.

The design principles are:

1. Clearly defined boundaries and memberships.
2. Rules in use are well matched to local needs and conditions.
3. Individuals affected by these rules can usually participate in modifying the rules.
4. The right of community members to devise their own rules is respected by external authorities.
5. An established system for self-monitoring members' behaviour.
6. A graduated system of sanctions is available.
7. Access to low-cost conflict-resolution mechanisms for Community members.

8. Nested enterprises—that is, appropriation, provision, monitoring and sanctioning, conflict resolution, and other governance activities—are organised in a nested structure with multiple layers of activities.

The greatest benefit of the successful comparison made is that microcultures in higher education can potentially be described through the use of Ostrom’s design principles without having to compromise differences in normative structure. Consequently they can be compared with each other despite perceived differences. It is further hypothesised that microcultures stable over time are more developed along the eight design principles than unstable microcultures.

## Overview of appended papers.

Paper	Questions	Methods used	Results in relation to the wider investigation
I	How do collegial contexts react to external influence, that is, to attempts to influence them through policy?	<i>Case study</i> Based on collegial contexts with an academically strong reputation in teaching and research. <i>Interviews</i> Open questions formulated on the basis of a firm theoretical perspective. Context: Research-intensive university	Collegial contexts are identifiable.  Academically strong collegial contexts interpret policies according to their own worldviews.  Academically strong collegial contexts decide for themselves to what extent they allow policies to influence them.
II	What does a system of collegial contexts look like?	<i>Literature study</i> <i>Deductive reasoning</i> Inference to the best explanation? Context: Any higher education organisation.	Variation in the collegial interaction forms the organising principle.  More frequent and more emotional communication (strong ties) forms a pattern of clusters linked to each other through less frequent and less emotional communication (weak ties).
III	Do members of the same collegial context share experiences from teaching with each other (through strong ties), and do they share them with other collegial contexts through weak ties?	<i>A hypothesis testing</i> Teaching experiences formulated as narratives describing teaching situations are told inside clusters (collegial contexts) and ‘travel’ along weak ties to other microcultures. <i>Interviews</i> Open-ended questions probing for: a. Do episodes emerge as narratives in the interviews? b. Do episodes originating from other contexts emerge in the material? Context: A research-intensive faculty.	Episodes do emerge as narratives inside collegial contexts.  Episodes originating from outside the interviewee’s collegial context do not emerge in the material.  Episodes appear to travel along weak ties after being transformed into rumours.  The overall idea about clusters constructed through strong ties and linked to other clusters through weak ties is supported.

IV	<p>Who do academic teachers talk to in relation to their teaching?</p> <p>What signifies these interactions?</p> <p>How do the numbers of conversational partners relate to how the teachers perceive their local working context?</p>	<p><i>Survey</i></p> <p>A questionnaire was used. Respondents were asked to indicate the number of partners in the interaction and where they found these partners: in the same discipline, in the same department, same faculty, or elsewhere.</p> <p>A subset of respondents was asked to indicate whether they found their working environment supportive, neutral, or hostile to this kind of conversations.</p> <p><i>Narratives</i></p> <p>Respondents were asked to describe what they considered a typical conversation.</p> <p>Context: A research-intensive university.</p>	<p>The respondents had a small number of conversational partners.</p> <p>The number tended to be larger (double) if the local working environment were perceived as supportive of these conversations.</p> <p>The narratives revealed these interactions as concrete, intense, meaningful, and based on trust.</p> <p>The conversational partners were found inside the working environment as well as outside. This pattern supports a conclusion that the conversational patterns in question traverse formal organisational boundaries.</p> <p>The conversations at hand, called significant conversations, form the individual academic's significant network.</p>
V	<p>How do the effects from pedagogical courses propagate in higher education organisations?</p> <p>What can this tell us about collegial contexts?</p>	<p><i>Deductive reasoning</i></p> <p>Inference to the best explanation?</p> <p>Disciplines, departments, workgroups, and significant networks are compared in relation to the question: How would effects from pedagogical course propagate in an academic organisation?</p> <p>Context: Any higher education organisation.</p>	<p>When effects are looked for, the significant networks and the workgroups are more powerful as frames than are disciplines and departments.</p> <p>When effects are detected, the significant networks predominantly reveal effects related to conceptual understandings of and ideas about teaching. Workgroups reveal changes in teaching practices.</p> <p>Effects may appear in both, or one without the other.</p>
VI	<p>Which aspects are useful when identifying or comparing collegial contexts?</p>	<p><i>Case study</i>, same as in Paper I.</p> <p>Case study results are compared to research on so-called 'limited resource pools' or 'commons'.</p> <p>Academically strong microcultures are compared to eight design principles important in well-functioning commons.</p> <p>Context: A research-intensive university.</p>	<p>The two socio-culturally formed entities (strong microcultures and commons) display similar design principles suggesting that further research on academic microcultures can explore the model developed in relation to commons or limited resource pools.</p>

**Table 1.** Matrix that summarises the appended papers.

# General discussion

## Results

The results compiled in the appended papers relate to two streams in the literature introduced at the beginning of the thesis. One is that higher education is placed under pressure by actions from various stakeholders and that this causes a demand overload experienced by individual academic teachers. The second is that academic teachers refer to interaction with colleagues as important for orientation and decision-making. At the outset of the thesis these collegial interactions were believed to buffer the effects from pressure.

It was further assumed that either the ambition is to change higher education or to sustain important values and competences; these processes of collegial interaction appear vital for the understanding of higher education organisations. Therefore, the purpose of this investigation is to further explore these patterns of collegial interaction and thereby contribute to a conceptually more developed understanding of higher education organisations.

It is clear from the literature that academic teachers are affected by the sociocultural context in which they are active. These collegially formed and maintained contexts are the focus of the investigation, which is discussed here.

In Paper I it is shown that academically successful collegial contexts interact with policy initiatives or other interventions from management. They do so actively, without being defensive. A conclusion made is that it is rather the collegial contexts than the management level that determines the impact of policies, at least in the research-intensive context where this thesis is materialised. Thus, the results support the notions of socio culturally formed collegial contexts within the meso level in the organisation. It is also clear that these contexts have the capacity to, at least partly, act independently from the management.

The case study that informs Paper I, about strong microcultures in higher education, has inspired a similar study at the Karolinska Institute (Bolander, 2011) where microcultures in hospitals engaged in clinical teaching are researched.

Paper II suggests, inspired from network research an organisational pattern where clusters, signified by strong ties (intense, frequent, and rich internal interaction) link to each other through weak ties (less intense, less frequent, and not as rich

interaction). Such conceptualisation of an organisation based on loosely coupled subunits is congruent with modern perspectives in organisational research (Meyer & Rowan 1977; Bamber et al., 2009; Eriksson-Zetterqvist et al., 2011).

Paper III empirically supports the conceptualisation made in Paper II. Teachers do communicate their experiences from teaching in a richer way inside the local working contexts to which they belong than they do with individuals belonging to other working contexts. There are therefore reasons to adopt a perspective on the meso level in higher education organisations as consisting of loosely coupled socio culturally formed collegial contexts (clusters) signified by strong ties internally and linked to each other through weak ties.

Up to this point the results presented in Paper I-III appear fairly straightforward and follow a clear path. Socio culturally formed collegial contexts and their influence on teaching practices have already been exemplified by Jawitz (2009) and others mentioned in the theory section. With an exception of weak ties linking the collegial contexts, the results presented so far therefore link to the literature rather than add to it.

Socio cultural formation has been studied for a long time. For example, Wenger's (1999) theory of communities of practice might serve well as a model. This theory includes structural aspects with effect on identity, enterprise, history, relationship to other collegial contexts, et cetera. Jawits (2009) explicitly uses Wenger in his investigation of how junior faculty learn to assess students in various communities. Could communities of practice function as a model for the socio culturally formed collegial contexts in the meso level?

A crucial aspect of Wenger's model is that community of practices "are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis." (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4) What if the members of a collegial context do not share a passion? What if they are just put together because they have to do a job? This would constitute a workgroup (Wenger, 2000) and not a community of practice. A workgroup could still develop a culture, even if the members are brought together against their will. Wenger's model would not match such a collegial context.

A related situation is a culture without a shared enterprise, that is, if the members do not share a vision for the future. This aspect is important in Wenger's perspectives, since the passion for the enterprise is what brings communities of practice together. Could it be that communities of practice, as a model, might function for certain socio culturally formed collegial contexts but not for others?

## Microcultures

So far we have focused on socio culturally formed collegial contexts in the meso level of higher education organisations. The terminology used has oscillated between knowledge networks, clusters, and collegial contexts. It is clear that these in many ways resemble communities of practice. But as has been pointed out, Wenger's model appears too narrow to cover the possible variation of collegial contexts.

While establishing a terminology we should therefore aim for something similar to Wenger's conceptualisation but allow for greater variation. It is clear in this investigation that the collegial contexts are culturally formed and that they exist in the meso level, that is inside a wider organisational culture. With these two aspects in mind the collegial contexts are hereafter called *microcultures*.

Culture allows for a conflictual as well as a consensus interior. The ties between individuals may be more or less strong. Further, culture, emphasise the normative structure, the tradition, as well as the agentic aspect on the part of the individuals. (This aspect follows Giddens' (2004) idea about structuration.) Culture operates through identities and belonging.

Group, is a term too vague and does not always incorporate the historic aspect visible through the Saga. Network is similar to microculture, but includes features external to the collegial context.

Micro is used instead of the possible prefix *sub*, as in subculture. Sub signals subordination, and would contradict the aspect of independence expressed through the theoretical perspective as well as through the results in Paper I. Micro simply indicates a relation to a wider something based on size.

Moreover, microcultures cannot simply be approximated with departments or disciplines. A microculture *might* be a department, a discipline, a programme committee, a number of colleagues working together with a course or a module, or any other gathering of colleagues existing over some time. Microculture signals a culturally formed organisational entity that exists over some time in the meso level, and where its members are perceived, by themselves and/or by others to share a context over time.

A question that remains to be answered is how a microculture can be distinguished inside a wider culture and in relation to other microcultures? This is not an easy question to answer. Culture is normally an illusive concept. One part of the answer has to do with the conceptualisation of organisational culture itself. Alvesson (2002) claims that culture is what makes groups of people in an organisation visible as a group and thereby becomes distinguishable from other groups. From the inside of a culture a similar aspect is related to the comment: "Well, this is how we do things around here." Microcultures become visible as patterns of

behaviour that vary from other patterns of behaviour inside a larger organisational culture. Another aspect of an answer relates to Us and Them. Usually individuals belonging somewhere talk about *The Others* in ways that emphasise boundaries. This argument relate to the fact that even though it is hard to distinguish a culture from a distance it is often easily detected as one moves across the border from the outside to the inside.

Therefore it is proposed that microcultures

- populate the meso level in higher education organisations
- are socio culturally formed and maintained collegial contexts
- influence individual teachers through norms that over time have emerged during collegial interaction
- are linked to other microcultures through weak ties, and
- play a part in higher education organisations' ability to buffer a threatening demand overload.

### **Qualitative differences of interactions**

So far the pattern of microcultures in the meso level has been described in a rather naive way. Through the perspective used they are visualised as clusters, strong, and weak ties. It has only implicitly been assumed that they differ from each other, but no observations have been presented about such qualitative differences, at least not in Papers I – III.

However, common sense and everyday experience support an intuitive understanding that microcultures differ immensely. Therefore, this investigation has to be taken further so that at least some aspects describing this variation are addressed.

Paper IV introduces the dimension of *significance* in the collegial interactions. Significant refers to the fact that some individuals are more important and are more listened to during the continuous construction of ideas and beliefs (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In line with this way of reasoning, collegial interactions permeated with significance are more important for the individual teacher while he or she constructs, maintains, or problematises his or her teaching and learning reality. Interactions with low or no significance for the academic teachers are unlikely to affect assumptions and beliefs. These processes are reciprocal in as much as if a teachers changes beliefs, this may affect his or her position, identity, and status in the collegial context.

The results presented in Paper IV show that academic teachers relate to a small number of significant others, which constitutes the academic teacher's *significant*

*networks*. The evidence shows that significant networks normally comprise 3–7 individuals. In addition, the respondents' narratives (reported in the paper) reveal that significant conversations almost always take place in private, or, using a term coined by Goffmann, backstage (Goffmann 2000). It was repeatedly reported that these conversations differ from frontstage conversations during meetings in workgroups and/or departments. It was also clear from the narratives that significant conversations in terms of richness and the level of trust relate positively to strong ties. However, this was not the case when it came to frequency. Instead, individuals significant to each other could be apart for a long time and when they met again, just continue the significant conversation from where they left off. In this way and at the level of trust reported, significant relations are similar to friendship (Alberoni, 1987).

The previous rather naïve description of microcultures is hereby problematised by the results in Paper IV, as the interactions inside a collegial context can be permeated by a higher or lower degree of significance.

The idea of significant networks has sparked research in various parts of the world. Thomson (2013) studied academic teachers' informal learning as it takes place backstage in corridors and around the water cooler. Her research was partly inspired by the idea of significant networks and her results support this idea and expands it further. Pyörälä et al. (2014) show that academic teachers at the University of Helsinki related to significant networks at different institutional levels, at units, departments, faculties, universities as well as national and international organizations. A group of eight scholars explored the idea of informal networks as a crucial factor for influencing higher education cultures (Williams et al., 2013). In the article, ideas presented in this thesis (Papers IV and II especially) form a significant foundation of the arguments put forward. The claims made in Paper IV are also supported by quantitative research (Patariaia 2013a; 2013 b).

It appears as though significance and significant networks make up an important dimension of collegial interactions in higher education.

## **Significant networks vs. workgroups**

In Paper V significant networks are contrasted with workgroups. It is argued that the effects of pedagogical courses propagate in different ways throughout significant networks and in workgroups. Ideas and conceptual material propagate more easily through significant networks than through workgroups. It is implied that this is due to the higher level of trust in the networks and to the fact that they operate backstage. Teaching practices, on the other hand, and especially those that involve an entire teaching team, have to spread frontstage in the workgroups and cannot remain backstage as in the significant networks.



Up to this point in the investigation, significant networks and workgroups have been dealt with as being distinctively different. But what happens if all members of a workgroup are also significant to each other? That is, what if the two overlap totally? Or in contrast, what signifies a workgroup where the level of significance is low or absent altogether?

It was assumed in the introduction that the key to understanding stability and change in higher education lies in the midst of the collegial interactions happening during day-to-day activities. The results emerging from the appended papers strengthen this idea and assert that these interactions result in microcultures within the organisational meso level. These are socio-culturally formed collegial contexts, which through the norms developed within them over time influence academic teachers. In short, microcultures stabilise higher education organisations.

For those interested in either influencing or preserving values and traditions in higher education, these microcultures should be the focus of attention. However, as also emerged from the results, the microcultures are not copies of each other. Even though they exist inside higher education and are permeated by academic values, they evolve in different directions as their respective members face different challenges and develop different sets of norms. Somewhere along the line and as argued by Ostrom (2005), these norms, have emerged as effective in relation to perceived challenges.

There are several reasons for why it is vital to understand the variation among the microcultures in higher education organisations. Firstly, any general and broad attempt to influence higher education can destroy well-functioning microcultures. Secondly, because it would be fair for higher education leaders to reward well-functioning microcultures and to focus change efforts on low functioning ones. Thirdly, because well-functioning microcultures have the potential to reach considerable levels of sophistication. Learning how to distinguish well-functioning from low-functioning microcultures is a productive enterprise; as is learning how to use this knowledge for improvement purposes. Two dimensions that can contribute to a better understanding of this variation are presented here.

The most distinct variation which appeared in the material (especially in Paper V) revolves around the issue of workgroups and significant networks. In the following discussion, this variation will be discussed.

## **Experience of shared responsibility**

It is acknowledged that workgroups are formed around a practice. They are to deliver a product or service or to accomplish a specified task (Wenger, 2000). Over time, each workgroup will develop cultural elements on how to do this. Trowler (2008) has provided an overview of the cultural elements present in

workgroups in higher education. Members of a workgroup may *experience a shared responsibility* for the task at hand or they may see the workgroup as a number of individuals doing their part in a whole in which they are not engaged. According to the socio-cultural perspective of this thesis, the level of engagement for the whole is a cultural element that, for example, new members entering the workgroup may experience. Just as the new academics in Jawitz's (2009) study experienced norms regulating how to assess students. Therefore, workgroups can culturally be permeated by a higher or lower engagement for a shared task or practice. In higher education this has to do with education, teaching, and/or student learning.

### **Level of significance**

The level of significance is the second dimension pursued here. Are the academics that share a microculture significant to each other in the sense described in Paper IV? If they are, they will allow the others to influence them and their beliefs and conceptual understanding; if they are not, the responses of others will have little or no effect. While considering this question, it would be a mistake to assume that people who are not significant to each other but still share a space can avoid being influenced by norms and other cultural elements. In his study *Behaviour in Public Places*, Goffmann (1963) has shown that even strangers passing each other on the sidewalk respond to each other according to cultural expectations.

### **Four types of microcultures**

These two dimensions, level of significance and experience of a shared responsibility are related to each other in Figure (2). In the figure, high significance is linked to strong ties, trust, and a sense of belonging. Low significance is linked to weak ties, low trust and a minimum sense of coexistence. Experiencing a shared responsibility for teaching means that the members cannot avoid each other. Actions are linked to expectations, whether these are formulated explicitly or not. It means that members are impacted by the actions of the each other and that they have to negotiate decisions. If they do not experience a shared responsibility it means that members can interact individually through their own narratives: and since they do not share responsibility, they can assume that these descriptions of what took place are self-evident. The result is a number of individuals performing their practices in parallel without interference from others. Consequently, they do not have to negotiate decisions with each other. (The aspects described are formulated from the members' point of view. Simply put, it is the members' experience of a shared responsibility or of significance that influence their decisions and actions.)

	<i>Degree of significance to each other</i>	<i>Degree of significance to each other</i>
	High significance Strong ties High trust Sense of belonging	Low significance Weak ties Low trust Sense of coexistence
<i>Experience of a shared responsibility</i>  Do things together Negotiate what to do Are impacted by what the others do	<b>The Commons</b>  Share a concern for a practice. Things are being negotiated in relation to the shared concern. An undertow of consensus. “We’re in this together.”	<b>The Market</b>  Share a concern for a practice. Ideas compete. Things are negotiated with an undertow of conflict. Relationships are formalised through contracts. “I look after myself.”
<i>No experience of a shared responsibility</i>  Do things in parallel Do not interfere in the others’ doings No negotiation	<b>The Club</b>  Peers come together without sharing a practice. Descriptions from practice are not challenged. Friendship and consensus is secured. “We’ll always support each other.”	<b>The Square</b>  Share a space with strangers. Things are negotiated only when necessary. Members enter into relationships and leave them continuously. “Who are these people?”

**Figure (2).** Four types of microcultures. The variation emerges as a function of whether members are significant to each other or whether they experience shared teaching responsibility.

The combination of the two dimensions results in four types of microcultures: the commons, the market, the club, and the square (Figure 2). The names indicate the overall climate of the four types. The descriptions characterise each type of microculture. Hopefully, the diagram can contribute to further investigations into various forms of microcultures and to an increased understanding of how one type

evolves into another. But, there are more things to find out.

For example, the four types do not necessarily imply anything about the individual members' experience of wellbeing. Cultures influence those who come into contact with them without necessarily being receptive to variations among the individuals. The most distinct individual experience concerns whether the person is accepted as a member or not, or whether the person is afforded membership or is expelled. The commons can be generous to individual initiatives, but also oppressive. The market can gain from competition, but can also suffocate members through power games driven by greed. The club can be a place where members receive advice and mutual support, but it can also be a haven for a clique that distances itself from the world. The square can be a place for new beginnings, new contacts and enterprises, but it can also be a depressing state of isolation in the midst of a crowd. The descriptions, thus, constitute the beginning of a journey, not a final roadmap. They are formulated with the purpose of inspiring continuous explorations of microcultures in higher education organisations.

However, the variation displayed in the figure has a bearing on things like stability and change, and on differences in the ability to handle teaching in a situation of demand overload. Dealing with demands has to do with the allocation of resources in times of stress, how to prioritise in times of conflicting interests, how to respond to opportunities, and how to support each other during problem solving or emotional turmoil. All these things benefit from an ability to negotiate.

Negotiation is dependent on the level of trust, a feature that consistently has been related to good governance (Rothstein, 2011) as well as to academic performance (Newell & Swan, 2000). Furthermore, as pointed out by both Wenger (1999) and Ostrom (1990), the ability to negotiate benefits from a certain degree of elasticity in existing rules.

Therefore, when it comes to resilience, coordination, and support in times of external pressure and demands, it is definitely an advantage for a microculture to be permeated by significance. The argument for this is that such microcultures become less partitioned. Members can seek support in each other; and the traditions and routines they maintain are more integrated into the everyday interactions.

The same is true for the organisation as a whole. It has already been argued that the existence of loosely coupled microculture is an advantage for the organisation. If they are well functioning, that is. Thus, it has been argued that two things are important for leaders of organisations: 1) to pay attention to the weak ties, so that their density and the quality of the information passing through them positively link the microcultures together in a shared responsibility for the practice at hand; and 2) to learn to distinguish well-functioning microcultures from less well-functioning ones, and to implement measures to support developing microcultures.

## Design principles

In addition to the aspect of significance there is also the temporal aspect: Microcultures have a history. There will always be a saga – stories told about chosen aspects of the past. The saga, in turn, is related to the enterprise, the idea about the future. An issue emerging in the material is whether the collegial contexts are productive or not, whether they are developmental in any sense; that is, whether they strive for improvement, sophistication, or a strong academic reputation in relation to teaching.

Paper VI reports the results of a case study where a small number of high performing microcultures were studied (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2011/2013). These microcultures are compared to a framework developed to understand how individuals can come together and manage to share the responsibility for a limited or fragile resource over a long period of time (Ostrom, 1990).

The framework, developed by Ostrom, was explicitly researched and formulated in opposition to Hardin's view (1968) that due to pervasive egoism a group of individuals cannot maintain a limited resource pool over time. The temptation for individual gain will inevitably lead to over-harvest and exhaustibility. The resource will be destroyed. Hardin argues that only tight state control through legislation or private ownership can guarantee the resource. Ostrom proved him wrong. Through an overwhelming number of case studies she demonstrated that individuals could and indeed can share this responsibility.

A conclusion Ostrom draws is that well-functioning resource pools share a number of a design principles. Ostrom avoids using the term 'rules' or 'norms' on this level; this is because the cases studied display such a variation in rules and norms. Despite this variation, the rules and norms appear to fulfil similar functions, and these functions she calls *design principles*. If they are in place, she argues, the individuals can collectively maintain the resource over what are sometimes extensive time periods. The idea pursued in Paper VI is that microcultures in higher education organisations that display these design principles are assumedly also functioning well.

The design principles are:

1. Clearly defined boundaries and memberships.
2. Rules in use are well matched to local needs and conditions.
3. Individuals affected by these rules can usually participate in modifying the rules.
4. The right of community members to devise their own rules is respected by external authorities.
5. An established system for self-monitoring members' behaviour.

6. A graduated system of sanctions is available.
7. Access to low-cost conflict-resolution mechanisms for Community members.
8. Nested enterprises—that is, appropriation, provision, monitoring and sanctioning, conflict resolution, and other governance activities—are organised in a nested structure with multiple layers of activities.

In Paper VI these design principles are compared to the strong and successful microcultures described in the higher education case study (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2011/2013). The comparison is tentative but promising. More research is needed to establish a link between the framework developed by Ostrom and well-functioning microcultures in higher education organisations.

An initial problem concerns the limited resource so important in Ostrom's framework. In Paper VI it is suggested that a strong and positive reputation and academic standing function as a resource for the microculture. It is an asset in the recruitment of new undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as academics. It is an asset when applying for funding and when pursuing new links for collaboration. Once established, the reputation is a resource. But this may apply only for already well-functioning microcultures.

Nevertheless, the microcultures discussed in Paper VI all apply to the temporal aspect. The members consciously pursue an enterprise in the shared experience of a common fate. They attend to their saga and continuously pursue the enterprise they invest in. The design principles they have developed support them in this. They are microcultures any dean would like to have in his or her faculty, college or school.

Finally, after having explored several aspects concerning microcultures and how they influence academic teachers, it is perhaps time to say something about critical thinking. Academic teachers are after all trained to formulate statements about the world based on a complex and personalised body of disciplinary knowledge. They are also trained in defending these positions sometimes against fierce critique. Would it not be the case that this aspect of academic life makes it highly unlikely that norms and rules emerging from socio-cultural processes could influence these academics away from being the knowledgeable and individual agents they are trained to be? At first glance, the question presents itself as a counter argument to the perspective presented.

Giddens' theory of structuration, however, does allow for individuals to be knowledgeable agents *and* simultaneously be influenced by structures, such as norms, rules, and traditions of a microculture. What signifies productive higher education organisations and their emphasis on critical thinking may therefore very well be not the absence of structures, but the existence of a *tension* between the individual agents and the structures. An invested intensity in a critical claim is in

itself dependent on firmness within the structures framing the situation. An increase in sophistication, being a result of critical thinking, arguably is dependent on the degree of inertia in the matter being probed.

## Methods

This section discusses the pros and cons of the methods applied in the various papers presented in the thesis.

### **Case study**

Papers I and VI rely heavily on a case study presented in another context (Roxå and Mårtensson 2011/2013). The aim of the previous study was to identify significant aspects within a small number of strong socio-culturally formed microcultures successful in both teaching and research. The case study format was chosen because of its potential to generate theory (Yin, 2009; Cohen et al., 2011). The investigation concerned academic teachers' personal understanding of their working environment in relation to several aspects: colleagues, flow of information, the history and future of the working environment, and the working environment's relation to the wider organisational context in which it was embedded.

For the purpose of this study it was important that the cases selected were indeed strong in both teaching and research. But even though the sample of contexts was made through a triangulation of different sources, it turned out to be difficult because the criteria of being 'strong' or academically 'successful' were unclear, especially in this case, when the criteria were to apply to both teaching and research. For this reason the interviews that were conducted with deans, heads of department and student union representatives supplied only limited guidance. These representatives, as it turned out, were unable to identify strong collegial contexts.

Therefore, in addition to the use of documented evaluations of teaching and research, the choice of sample partly resulted from the authors' personal experiences with the chosen faculties. Both authors have both been active in the faculties for more than a decade each, and during that period have met hundreds of teachers.

Scholars indicate the need for thick descriptions in research inspired by ethnographic perspectives (Van Maanen, 1998; Alvesson & Kärreman 2007; Yin, 2009) and this research responded to this plea. It is important to keep in mind

while doing this that the researcher/writer *constructs* the report (Van Maanen, 1988) and thereby at this stage interprets and adds meaning to the material.

It is of course problematic that the researchers *construct* the material. The degree to which such descriptions match what could be labelled ‘the actual events’ has been debated for a long time (e.g. Clifford, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988). In the present study an elaborated theoretical perspective explicitly formulated before entering into the field counteracted this researcher bias. Such a procedure allows the thick descriptions to be judged through this explicit perspective.

However, the initial use of an explicit theoretical perspective has also been critiqued (Maxwell, 2005) since the theory will bias the perception of the researchers. The undoubtedly greatest advantage of the strategy chosen here is that the preconceived ideas the researchers brought with them into the field are at least partly overt for the reader.

Another strategy suggested (e.g. Yin, 2009) is to invite representatives of the contexts studied to comment on the thick description before it is finalised. All five collegial contexts were invited to comment on the final report. In two of the five cases the researchers were invited to lead a seminar on the report.

It has often been stated that it is hard to generalise from case studies (e.g. Cohen et al., 2009). If five microcultures are studied, what is then really known about all other microcultures that were not studied? One aspect of this problem is the general problem of induction (Persson & Sahlin, 2013). If some As are B, can we then claim that all As are B? We cannot. But as the authors point out, the crucial aspect is not the observation as such, but the accuracy of the rule that is assumed to control the As. Thus, the case study discussed here is more targeted towards the rule than towards a claim that all strong microcultures always look the same. It is not the surface of the observation that is interesting. It is the abductive steps taken towards the underlying pattern to which strong microcultures arguably are linked. This claim is consistent with Yin (2009).

Logically, the above results in the somewhat contradictory conclusion that the deeper the cases are studied (i.e. the richer and more nuanced the description is) the more differences between the five cases will become apparent. Thus, the problem of generalisability will become more acute. On the other hand, the more differences visible, the better the opportunities to construct a functioning rule (theory) about the cases studied. This is so because the variation emerging through the rich descriptions makes it possible to discern more aspects with the potential to adjust the rule.



## Interviews

Tight (2012) labels interviews “the heartland of social research” (ibid. 2012, p. 185), and argues that this is also the case in higher education research. They represent such an obvious strategy because you just “ask people questions and listen to their responses” (ibid., p. 185). Interviews are used in Papers I, III, IV, and VI. It is also the most used method in this thesis.

“A ‘typical’ qualitative interview is, at best, a construct known only in the ideal” (Van Maanen 1998, p. xxiii). But, an interview as a situation, especially perhaps the open-ended and conversational type interview (Cohen et al., 2011) that is used in the appended papers, should be seen as jointly co-constructed by the interviewee and the interviewer (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2011). What is being said in the interview is influenced by the interviewee’s reflexive interpretation of the situation as well as by the interpretations made by the interviewer. Hence, answers offered during an interview cannot be assumed to *describe the reality* they officially refer to. They describe the results of an interaction between how the interviewee *in the situation of the interview* experiences the teaching and learning reality; and how the interviewer interprets what is being said.

To partly control such effects, the interviews were deliberately conducted in the respondent’s office or in a location of his or her choice. It was assumed that the location of the interview, normal in terms of where the daily practices were conducted, would support thoughts and feeling connected to the daily practice and limit the influence from the interview situation.

In one example, Paper III, the interviewee did not previously know the interviewer. It can be discussed what effects this deliberate choice had. The argument formulated was that since the interview was about experiences from the classroom, a new interviewer would not be associated with a specific language or jargon, as would a previously known interviewer. It was assumed that this would give personal experiences precedence over the description of events. This relates to the problem described by Tight (2012) that interviews deal with descriptions of events, not the events themselves. They are, as already stated, edited material conformed to the situation of the interview.

Following up on another aspect, what should be included in an interview? The words only or other material? Maxwell (2005) takes this further. He favours what he calls realist interviews. These include phenomena, such as feelings, beliefs, conceptions, the unspoken and avoided, and so on, as evidence “to be used critically to develop and test ideas about existence and nature of the phenomenon” (ibid., p. 73).

To take advantage of such aspects, the two interviewers in the case study (Papers I and VI) summarised each interview in a study protocol immediately after the

interview: Both researchers independently summarised their impressions from the interview and synthesised these summaries into one study protocol. The protocol proved to be crucial material during the continuation of the study. It is argued here that this strategy allowed the interviewers to also reflect on the unspoken and avoided material as well as on variation in the emotional state during the interview.

## **Narratives**

A way to avoid some of the problems related to interviews is the use of narratives. Narratives are explicitly used in Papers III and IV, even though they frequently emerge in the interviews carried out during the case study and thereby also provided material for Papers I and VI. They are treated as stories describing episodes in the day-to-day activities of the narrator.

In educational research, narratives are used to reveal how people make sense of their lives by selecting and arranging information about noteworthy episodes (Cousin, 2009). Narratives “not only pass on information” but they also assist to “crystallize or define an issue, view, stance or perspective” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 553). More than mere data, narratives package experience as stories with an attached personal meaning (Webster & Mertova 2007).

Framed as they are by a socio-cultural perspective, the papers favour narratives. These were collected both in writing and during interviews. The influence of the interview situation is minimised if the narrator is invited to write a narrative. Narratives, thus, according to the socio-cultural perspective, potentially provide insights into the activities that are ‘true’ to the narrator. In many ways the material provided through narratives has been taken for granted in the research presented here.

It can be argued that this is problematic since pitfalls linked to narratives originate from the fact that the narrator uses only his or her perspective. It narrows the perspective and often fails to uncover causes for actions other than those perceived by the narrator. Furthermore, narratives seldom problematise the perspective of the narrator (Maxwell, 2012, p. 45).

Arguably, a researcher has to make a choice whether to take the descriptions provided in narratives for granted or to critically examine them, even deconstruct them, or to use them as they are and instead triangulate (i.e. compare with other sources). In Papers I and VI, focus groups with students were placed last in the series of interviews within each microculture. The purpose was to check (triangulate) whether the same stories and similar emotional reaction could be detected. In a few cases narratives told by academic teachers were retold to students who were invited to comment on them.

## Interdisciplinarity

Paper VI represents a special case as it uses as a method a theoretical framework originating from another discipline. According to Tight (2012) this is a common strategy in higher education research. He claims that frameworks from psychology and sociology in particular have been in frequent use. To do this is in many ways rewarding and inspiring. Here I would like to comment on this strategy, both because it is used in the thesis, and because it is not necessarily unproblematic.

In relation to this, Person and Sahlin (2013) refer to a concept used in the philosophy of science: *incommensurability*. This concept describes the risk that two disciplines, and the knowledge they generate, are hard or even impossible to compare, let alone combine. With this in mind, the attempt to use Ostrom's framework for commons (Ostrom 1990) to further illuminate the ongoing investigation about microcultures in higher education, described in Paper VI, might simply be impossible.

In Paper VI energy is spent on legitimising that academic reputation or academic standing is comparable to the limited resources that are so central to Ostrom's framework. It is argued that a strong academic reputation is a resource for which a group of academics can experience a shared responsibility. Hence, it has to be protected against over usage by members of the collegial context and against external forces, interests, or bluntly uninvited attempts to profit from it. The legitimising effort pursued in the paper is seen as crucial for a productive comparison to be possible.

Once this initial argument is made, the paper continues to compare design principles of functioning commons to the material collected in the case study use in Papers I and VI. In conjunction with the issue of incommensurability, Person and Sahlin (2013) discuss, with reference to Kuhn, four conditions where overlap between the two domains is arguably necessary for productive interdisciplinary processes:

- a) *Symbolic generalisations* such as  $F=ma$ . These are stepping stones for future research (the author's translation from Swedish). These are assumptions about what is considered valid enough to function as platforms for future research.
- b) *Exemplars* from the disciplines history.
- c) *Metaphysical assumptions* about how to understand things like cause, reality, and other even more ontological assumptions.
- d) *Scientific values*. Here I chose to expand the suggestions offered by Person and Sahlin and let scientific values include also assumptions about the discipline's relationship with the world outside the disciplinary boundaries.

These conditions can now be used for the purpose of tentatively analysing whether the framework offered by Ostrom is commensurable with the material on strong microcultures in higher education.

In short it is argued here that a sufficient overlap exists between the two: a) The two domains both investigate institutionalised practices and the way they organise themselves to be sustainable. b) The example related to this condition resonates negatively in both domains. Ostrom repeatedly critiques an essay by Hardin entitled *The Tragedy of the Commons* (Hardin 1968). Hardin argues that due to human egoism a group of people cannot over time maintain a limited resource (a commons) for which they share responsibility. He argues that this can only be done either by state-control or by private ownership. Ostrom's research, just as the study of strong microcultures, rejects Hardin's speculation. c) The two research domains prefer to view reality through the eyes of the individuals inhabiting the commons or the microculture. d) Both share a desire to say something useful, something that will have an impact on practices, which also are the object of study.

This only scratches the surface of a multi-complex issue: How does one go about comparing disciplines and assessing and legitimising attempts to move disciplinary frameworks across disciplinary boundaries? The outcome of this draft comparison supported by Persson and Sahlin (2013) is, however, promising.

## **Abduction**

The overall methodological approach applied is associated with abduction in as much as it strives to uncover underlying explanatory structures in the material, with the power to *explain* identified observations (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008). Abduction strives to generate explanations useful to further the understanding of a phenomenon and/or to formulate hypotheses that can be tested in future studies (Person & Sahlin, 2013, p. 157). Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2008) argue for an abductive approach in the study of organisations partly because of the complexity inherent in the object of study. The creative step inherent in abduction, they say, increases the value of the explanations given.

Peirce, the founder of Pragmatism, claimed that the scientific method begins with abduction or the formulation of a hypothesis, an informed guess. This initial hypothesis should be able to explain a surprising or puzzling phenomenon (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2014a). This tentative hypothesis is then tested, logically but also against what is previously known about the specific phenomenon. The goal of this phase is to formulate testable claims that can be tested in experiments or other methods (Persson & Sahlin 2013). The objective of such mostly multiple tests is to establish empirical material that validates or refutes the initial hypothesis.

The idea of abduction is grounded in the fact that observations cannot always be explained deductively as derived from rules, or from a compilation of observations. Peirce, the founder of pragmatism, argued that the formation of an explanation requires a creative act where the research is stretched beyond the borders of an existing rule or existing observations (James, 1981). An example could look like this:

X is observed

What can explain this observation?

Y can explain the observation.

Therefore, Y is meaningful.

Many philosophers of today agree upon the fact that the abductive method is used frequently in everyday reasoning (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2014b). But the question emerging is of course whether Y actually *is the best* possible explanation for X? Peirce himself, as did many pragmatists, argued that the answer to this question depends partly on the outcome of the situation where Y is held true (James, 1981; Dewey, 1982). If it leads to a better situation it strengthens the argument for Y, hence the name ‘pragmatism’. An inductivist would instead argue that Y is true as long as all possible observations support Y; while a deductivist would argue that Y is true if it can be derived from an accepted scientific law (Persson & Sahlin 2013).

Lipton (2004) relates to this while discussing *inference to the best explanation* as a strategy to decide the explanatory value of an explanation like Y. He discusses the value of different explanations and differentiates between two aspects of an explanation: one that it is likely and one that is lovely. The *likely aspect* is what can be inferred to directly by the observations made. An explanation becomes more likely the closer it is formulated to the available observations. The explanation is entirely likely if it say nothing more than restates the observations made. The *lovely aspect* expands away from available observations as it aims to add meaning to the explanation; but as it does so, it distances itself from the available observations and makes claims about things not yet observed. As it does, it runs the risk of becoming a mere speculation, something that is scientifically uninteresting.

Even so, Lipton argues for the courage among researchers to strive for the loveliest *possible* explanation. “Sometimes the likeliest explanations are not very enlightening”, Lipton (2004, p. 59) continues, and sometimes the loveliest explanation might be cut right out of the blue and basically resemble a conspiracy theory. Lipton argues for researchers to strive for explanations that are *both* likely *and* lovely. If there is any point in abduction, researchers should avoid triviality and be bold enough to strive for lovely explanations; a statement also supported by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2008).

Lipton continues: for “Inference to the Best Explanation to provide an illuminating account, it must say more than that we infer the likeliest cause” (ibid., p. 60). That is, the value of abduction lies not solely in its likeliness of the explanations it provides, but also in their explanatory potential, or put differently, how lovely they are. So, what we should consider, Lipton argues, is “Inference to the Loveliest Potential Explanation” (ibid., p. 61). In abductive reasoning the best potential explanation is sought for as it is shaped by a creative act introduced by the researcher.

Thus, the abductive element in this thesis is strong since it attempts to formulate potential explanations of observed phenomena. These explanations, so to say, place themselves at some distance from the likeliest explanations in order to add explanatory potential; they strive to be as lovely as possible.



# Conclusions

The following conclusions are made in this thesis:

- The organisational meso level in higher education organisations can be conceptualised as a pattern of microcultures.
- Microcultures are socio-culturally formed collegial contexts emphasising belonging, identity, and status. The prefix ‘micro’ emphasises embedment into a wider organisational culture.
- Microcultures are linked together through weak ties, that is, infrequent and scarce interaction. These interactions are decisive for organisational coordination and governance, especially in times of external pressure. The results illustrate empirically how this aspect is less developed in one specific organisation.
- Collegial interaction inside the microcultures potentially enables microcultures to be active as agents inside a wider organisation. This further contributes to stability in times of pressure and demand overload.
- Microcultures can be studied through attention to eight design principles. These are distinguishable features of internal and external governance.
- Four types of microcultures are suggested: *the commons*, *the market*, *the club*, and *the square*. This typology was generated through a combination of how important the colleagues sharing a microculture are for each other and whether they experience a shared responsibility for an educational practice.





# Future research

As the scientific approach taken in this investigation is foremost abductive, it can be argued that the real purpose is to formulate explanations that can lead to researchable questions. A few research projects external to this investigation have already been inspired by the results presented in the appended papers. But more questions emerge.

How can microcultures be identified inside real higher education organisations? The conceptualisation of the meso level in higher education organisations suggested in this thesis is dependent on research able to establish microcultures empirically. This has been done through the case study used in Papers I and VI. But it might still be the case that microcultures emerge only as they become stronger, implying that academically weak or even average microcultures are hard or impossible to identify, or that they simply do not exist.

How can microcultures be categorised? The idea is that a microculture is defined through variation in the interaction between members. Four types of microcultures are suggested in this thesis: the commons, the club, the market, and the square. But these are analytical constructs. It remains to be shown empirically that these types exist in higher education organisations.

How microcultures change and develop? Microcultures are formed naturally through interaction. It is claimed that the norms they develop can scaffold a process of increased sophistication. But this is not an automatic process. Microcultures might as well be neutral or even destructive. For anyone interested in the performance of higher education organisations it is a key to understand how microcultures develop, i.e. how change comes about. As suggested in Paper VI, this can possibly be done through a focus on different microcultures respective design principles and how these vary over time.

How do weak ties function as carriers of information? In multiple places in the text, the weak ties have been pointed out as crucial. They allow information inside the organisation to move and thereby they can afford organisational learning. But not much is known about this. For anyone interested in the performance of such organisations it is of crucial value to further explore the importance and function of weak ties in higher education organisation.



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# Other publications by the author

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# Paper I





## From quality assurance to quality practices: an investigation of strong microcultures in teaching and learning

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One of the main beliefs in quality assurance is that this activity – indirectly – will stimulate change in the work practices associated with teaching and learning in higher education. However, few studies have provided empirical evidence of the existence of such a link. Instead, quality assurance has created an unfortunate divide between formal rules and routines, and the daily practices in academia associated with teaching and learning. This article reports a study of ‘quality work’ – concrete practices in academic microcultures with a reputation for being strong in their teaching and learning as well as in their research function. We argue that the relationship between quality assurance and enacted quality practice needs to be understood in the light of how formal organizational structures, as well as cultural characteristics and academic aims, are balanced within working groups in universities.

**Keywords:** quality assurance; quality practices; academic microcultures; teaching and learning

### Introduction

The introduction of systematic quality assurance is perhaps one of the most noticeable effects of interest in reforming higher education in recent decades (Dill and Beerkens 2010). While much attention has been devoted to establishing national systems of quality assurance, there is increasing evidence that higher education institutions have also built up internal quality assurance schemes – here understood as formal systems of evaluation and monitoring of their teaching and learning provision under strong organizational and managerial control. However, one could argue that such quality assurance schemes are currently facing new challenges.

First, quality assurance seems to face a problem in legitimizing its impact on the area of which it originally was introduced – improving and securing the quality of teaching and learning. In general, empirical studies show that quality assurance does produce effects, although these are more related to governance and accountability issues than to teaching and learning (Stensaker 2008; Stensaker and Harvey 2011a).

Second, quality assurance has also (increasingly) been met with scepticism by academics working in higher education. Many academics report that quality assurance is an instrument not related to their interests and activities, and as a consequence, that

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quality assurance has often been de-coupled from ‘academic life’ (Newton 2000; Harvey and Stensaker 2008).

Third, even among politicians one can find a growing interest in going beyond quality assurance as a way of addressing the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education. The current strong focus on learning outcomes, and the recent interest in implementing qualification frameworks in Europe is just one indication of the search for new tools to accommodate these objectives (Prøitz 2010).

The argument discussed in this article is that quality assurance has created an unfortunate divide between the formal rules and routines initiated to support quality and the daily practices in academia associated with teaching and learning. We argue that quality assurance has much to learn from what Massy (1999) calls ‘quality work’ – the seamless integration of the practices associated with teaching and learning, together with reflections on these practices. However, we also argue that teaching and learning practices can potentially be further improved by opening up to more systematic and scholarly ways to reflect on taken-for-granted practices, even if those practices may be seen as functioning well by those who use them.

This article mainly uses a cultural approach to opening up our understanding of the divide between quality assurance and daily teaching practices in academia. The article provides an analysis of five academic ‘microcultures’ with a reputation for taking teaching and learning issues seriously (Roxå and Mårtensson 2011). Microcultures here mean departments or working groups within specific departments or educational programmes, in other words a group of people working together in an academic endeavour. Our aims are as follows: first, to identify more theoretically the various perspectives that could characterize such strong microcultures; second, to compare how the theoretical perspectives match key characteristics in the five microcultures studied; and third, and perhaps most importantly, to discuss the links between quality assurance and quality practice, not least the relationship between formal procedures and daily practices. We wish to underline that we do not intend to try to define quality as such nor ‘solve’ the problem of grasping the qualities of quality. Rather, the implications of the article are that a practice-oriented approach, influenced by a cultural perspective, might bring us forward in solving some of the challenges facing quality assurance by highlighting activities that seem to have an impact and add value to the quality of teaching and learning.

### **Quality practice: theoretical perspectives and some reflections**

In recent years, we have witnessed a renewed interest within the social sciences for more anthropological and ethnographic-inspired studies, inspired by research in the sociology of science (Knorr Cetina 2007). Some examples are the interest in analysing institutional work within neo-institutional theory (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009); the emphasis on studying strategy-as-practice in the field of management (Whittington 2006); or the use of the concept of epistemic cultures in the sociology of knowledge (Knorr Cetina 2007). In the field of higher education research one can also find studies analysing strategic processes more in detail (Jarzabkowski 2005).

The common denominator in all these contributions is an attempt to identify and investigate the ‘machineries of knowledge construction’ (Knorr Cetina 2007, 363). Such machineries contain not only social structures, but also material structures such as technology, budgetary and evaluation arrangements and requirements, or managerial tools (performance and management information systems). While such material

structures are often seen as ‘technical’ arrangements to which culture and identity are attached, we agree with Knorr Cetina (2007) in that culture and identity are integrated parts of how the social and material structure is constituted through practice. In this process, we focus particularly on how those working in universities and colleges manage and try to control their professional lives, and how they also contribute to change and influence the realities they are facing. As Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 962) have pointed out, human agency can be described as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past, but also oriented toward the future (as a ‘projective’ capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a ‘practical-evaluative’ capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).

### *Three perspectives to analyse quality practice*

The key question following an ambition to analyse quality practice is of course related to the factors conditioning the enhancement of such a practice. A point of departure here is the distinction, touched upon above, between quality assurance as procedures found in formal organizational structures – stated in policy-documents – while quality practice is understood almost invariably in cultural terms – the continuous creation of meaning and value in the daily practice. One could also argue that higher education reforms and various policy initiatives play a significant role in affecting the development of both quality assurance and quality practices (Newton 2000) suggesting that there might exist several perspectives on how to understand and interpret quality practice.

Hence to analyse the conditions that affect the intersection between quality assurance and quality practice, we adapt three perspectives on organizations presented by Van Maanen (2007) and further developed in Ancona et al. (2009). Organizations can, according to this view, be analysed through three different lenses: formal, political, and cultural. All three overlap to some extent, and in order to fully understand a complex organization one must use all three. The *formal lens* reveals the rationally designed organization and how it is intended to work. Here, structures are seen as a way of steering organizational behaviour and practice (Schmidt 2008). Crucial for organizational success through this lens is the degree of alignment between different organizational subunits and an overall objective; but also an accurate and efficient flow of information making it possible for managers to make rational decisions, which in turn can guide practitioners while they collectively add value to the organization. Typically in universities, this lens focuses on formal roles in the organization: senior management, deans, heads of departments and so forth. The *political lens* reveals alliances, power struggles and negotiations between different stakeholders. Through this lens the arena where control over practice is resolved becomes visible. The political lens is important for understanding the consequences of reforms inside higher education institutions. According to the political lens, reform is a measure that, amongst other things, is intended to change internal power structures – potentially empowering some actors while disempowering others. But power and authority are complex entities that are also influenced by structure and culture in ways that are not always easy to predict (Arendt 1961/2006). The *cultural lens* reveals how meaning is created and interpreted in everyday practices – how the organization over time is infused with value. Key concepts are professional identity, traditions and social networks. Practice becomes embedded in social relations while members engage in meaning-making

that over time result in traditions – ‘the way we do things around here’ – with further implications for how practice materializes. These traditions shape into ‘teaching and learning regimes’ (Trowler 2008), influencing individuals’ views on teaching methods, students, epistemological perspectives, power relationships and so on.

These three perspectives, or lenses, should not be seen as mutually exclusive, although each of them, for analytical purposes, can shed light on how formal quality assurance procedures and daily practices are interpreted and handled by academic teachers. In this text we will mainly use a cultural lens.

### *Quality practices: some key elements*

While the three organizational perspectives outlined above provide different ‘world-views’ from the point of the microcultures, they can, in principle, also be seen as opening up a potential divide between taken-for-granted quality practices and perceived forms of ‘quality assurance’ (Ratcliff 2003, 125). Hence a possible integration of quality assurance and quality practice would then be a form of reflective practice enabling the organization both to act and to reflect on its own behaviour. Three elements might be of particular interest as characterizations of reflective practices. First, reflective practices need to have an element of *self-monitoring* built into the organization. Recent research suggests that organizations with high self-monitoring abilities are better capable of assessing how their organization is perceived from the outside (Price and Gioia 2008). Self-monitoring is an important area of research in this context, as the whole idea of monitoring and reporting is perhaps the most criticized element of traditional quality assurance. The issue is then to study alternative means to conduct self-monitoring in organizations. Second, an element of *conflict* is needed within the organization to introduce dynamism into an interpretation of the outcomes of self-monitoring processes. This element may seem surprising since conflict is often seen to hinder organizational change and development. However, recent research has nuanced our understanding of conflict between actors with fixed self-interest. As Eisenhart, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois (1997, 60) point out: ‘Rather, conflict reflects a continuing evolving understanding of the world that is gained through interaction with others around alternative viewpoints.’ The same researchers also found that high-performing teams in knowledge organizations were all characterized by a very high level of substantive conflict, whereas low performing teams were characterized by low conflict levels (Eisenhart, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois 1997). The key seems to be that conflict needs to be played out in procedural forms centred on facts and alternative options, rather than as interpersonal frictions. Additionally, research focused on the self-governance of limited resource-pools or ‘commons’ (Ostrom 1990) strengthens this argument (Janssen et al. 2010). Intense communication and trust among individuals involved, including the potential use of sanctions, appear essential while forming the norms necessary for maintaining practice in relation to a shared interest.

However, conflict also needs some kind of resolution. Weick (1995) has consistently argued that since our ability to look forward is heavily dependent on norms and values created by history and traditions, *sense-making* – the process of creating coherence and meaning in situations characterized by complexity – is predominantly path dependent. This implies that one cannot choose freely among all alternative options. Rather, choices are to a large extent shaped by existing concepts, values and norms – and new interpretations and practices are added to, or transform, existing ones. Reflective practices from this perspective would entail a high level of sensitivity

towards the past identity and key characteristics of the organization, along with an ability to re-interpret these in accordance with the perceived needs for change. While universities certainly should not be conceived as one-dimensional organizations, we argue that the theoretical framework outlined above provides valuable analytical tools for investigating how academic microcultures try to use quality assurance initiatives, and how concepts, perspectives and routines introduced as traditional, formal quality assurance are blended into everyday practices. In this way, the framework can also provide a better understanding of the complexity and the many paradoxes found within universities.

### **Empirical data and material for analysis**

The material for our analysis originates from a recent investigation in a research-intensive university. The case-based study explored how teaching quality is viewed, reflected upon, and enacted in five strong academic microcultures (for details about the original study see Roxå and Mårtensson (2011)). Strong microcultures in this organizational context means successful in relation to both teaching and research activities. The microcultures are defined as groups of people working together within this university, tied together by sharing a discipline, department, working group or educational programme. The microcultures we investigated ranged in size from 10 to 60 members. The main focus of the original study was to enhance our overall understanding of how these academic microcultures function in relation to good practices of teaching and learning.

### ***Process***

#### *Step 1*

The five microcultures we studied were selected from three different faculties within the university. The selection process started by asking deans, vice-deans, heads of department and teaching committees (11 people in total), as well as student representatives in those faculties, to identify successful (strong) microcultures.

#### *Step 2*

Resulting suggestions were triangulated with documented results from internal and external national quality assurance evaluations. Criteria for selection were:

- Strong in teaching as well as in research (as defined by an external research assessment exercise conducted three years earlier).
- Teaching activities at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
- Fairly large membership of the microculture (minimum of 10) as well as number of students per year (range from 150 to 1000).

#### *Step 3*

After selection, each microculture – here coded as S, P, R, K and F – was approached and asked if it was willing to be studied. All accepted. Next, semi-structured interviews were conducted; 4–5 interviews in each microculture, individually with senior and junior academics as well as with groups of students. Altogether 45 people were

interviewed: 17 academics and 28 students. All staff interviews in each microculture were completed before interviewing the students. Interview questions concerned internal issues such as group values and teaching practices, decision-making, group history, improvements and developments, as well as collaborations outside the microculture, relations to organizational structures and so on.

In this paper we revisit the empirical material and investigate how these microcultures relate to quality assurance initiatives introduced by senior managers of the faculty (school) or the university. Of particular importance in this context is the recently implemented European Bologna Treaty, a teaching quality framework stressing the introduction of, and reliance on, formulating learning outcomes, and a process of rewriting all syllabi. National and institutional quality assurance in this context is therefore currently focused on alignment of learning outcomes at different levels in the system, from course modules to entire educational programmes. We will therefore focus in particular on exploring how the microcultures have dealt with this policy in relation to their practice.

## **Quality practice enacted**

### *Ambitions in teaching*

It is striking that in all five microcultures, teaching is taken seriously, with high ambitions. The reasons for this are phrased differently, but all answers refer to a reputation of being excellent, which is a foundation for future activities: ‘The freshmen, our junior students, are the most important. That is where we lay the foundation for our reputation’ (R, senior). Another senior teacher (P) formulates a similar standpoint: ‘If we have bad teaching, we cannot possibly have good research ... uh, we must have, we must show that we have, the best courses.’ Even though teaching and research appear as two practices, it is obvious that they are intimately connected for the respondents. Both are important means of advancing the field, of having an impact far beyond the microcultures’ borders (Roxå and Mårtensson 2011).

The student interviews confirm statements about high-quality teaching made by teachers. Students express how they are challenged and exposed to high expectations, but also that they experience engagement and support. One teacher (senior, R) explains the importance of laboratory work for students in his field: ‘It is a philosophy we have always had. Everyone that takes a course in our field must have done things in practice. So, we have ... hmm ... each year we have six hundred to seven hundred students working in the lab.’ In the focus-group interview, students in R were asked the question ‘What is it like to be a student here?’ The immediate response was ‘They know who you are’, followed by, ‘The work in the laboratory is excellent.’ Similar patterns of convergence emerge in interviews with all five microcultures.

Very few teachers could explain the origin of this ambition in teaching when asked about it. It appears as a thoroughly integrated part of the tradition.

Well, I don’t know where it comes from. It is both ... yeah ... we want to be best ... I honestly don’t know. It is self-evident. (senior, F)

A junior teacher in the same context also tries to explain his personal reasons for being ambitious:

They [those who taught him] were almost without exception very good lecturers, so ... there is a kind of ... there is absolutely no expectation about it or, like you have to be



as good as ... uh ... because it is difficult, but uh they are putting up like a standard for how it should be. (junior teacher, F)

High ambitions in teaching thus appear as an integrated part of these microcultures' traditions, in other words, they are institutionalized. Ambition – as illustrated by the quotation above – seems to be handed over and internalized through socialization and has its origin in the history of the specific microculture. However, the tradition also appears to set boundaries for reflection with the result that almost all thinking about how to improve teaching materializes within the existing teaching paradigm in each microculture.

There are also examples in all the microcultures that sometimes teaching quality does not meet the high standards set internally. Examples include colleagues who do not put enough effort into teaching, or student evaluation results going down. It is apparent from the interviews that these – rare – occasions are dealt with immediately through collegial support, exchange of teaching materials, or even changing the teachers responsible for the course. None of the microcultures ignore this kind of problem.

### ***Quality practice in an organizational context***

The contexts we studied interact with the surrounding organization, but almost always on their own terms. According to the microcultures they decide when and how to engage, with whom and to what end.

When asked whose opinion they listened to and cared about, initial answers did not include the formal organization. One interviewee talked at great length about how they interacted intensively with representatives from the profession. After elaborating on this, she was asked 'You haven't mentioned the faculty ... or the department?' Her response was 'No.... I guess you simply are where you stand.... I'm very much attached to the profession. And, seriously, contact with the faculty is very limited.'

All microcultures reported engagement in various committees and in departmental administration. They want to be well oriented and to have access to information in order to act when necessary. One interviewee revealed how an educational board had made a decision that was wrong from the microculture's perspective. 'So we had to take on the fight.... It is the kind of things ... yeah ... there were some decisions that had to be annulled ... hmm' (senior, R).

All microcultures were also engaged in, and open to, various forms of collaboration, within as well as outside the formal organization. However, they wanted to choose the collaborators themselves, based on tradition, epistemological similarities, or other traits that make the potential partner *interesting*. 'It shall ... it must contribute to the field' (senior, K). In some cases, microcultures are encouraged, directed, or even forced into collaborative projects by a head of department or a dean. This is often met with suspicion or hesitation and is even described as mainly time-consuming. In one example (P), though, collaboration was initiated partly because of critique from a research quality audit. In this particular case, however, the critique demanded more international collaboration in general, not with a specific partner.

These accounts offer a picture where the microcultures are far from isolationist. On the contrary, they are all active in influencing decisions and finding potential collaborative partners. Initiatives are triggered either by explicit awareness of where there is a need to develop, or by critique. When asked to specify why they do things, they are almost unanimous in their answers: It is interesting and good for the advancement of



the field. When pushed or forced to collaborate they oppose and/or obstruct more or less openly. But in all situations, they consider themselves to be the leading party; they govern themselves, and they relate selectively to directives from above in the formal organization.

### *View from the formal organization*

Since we are exploring quality enacted by local microcultures situated in a formal or designed organization, it is important also to consider this relationship from ‘above’, i.e. from the perspective of senior management in the formal organization.

As described above, one of several strategies to select microcultures for this study was to ask formal leaders at faculty or department level to identify within their part of the organization, where to find strong microcultures to study. The main result of these interviews was that the leaders – with very few exceptions – had difficulty in identifying strong microcultures, or what might signify them (Roxå and Mårtensson 2011). Many of the leaders claimed that it would have been easier to identify problematic microcultures. They tried to reason their way through to an answer, all using different premises as indications of quality: lack of complaints from students, or the ability to balance the budget, or even equating strong microcultures in education with strengths in research. In sum, the formal leaders generally displayed an absence of a shared value system usable for identification of quality practice.

### **Relations between quality practice and quality assurance**

Traditional quality assurance has, as stated, initially been performed mainly through the formal organization. Perhaps the most relevant aspect of this investigation therefore is to highlight from a more cultural perspective how microcultures respond to policies concerning quality assurance. As mentioned earlier, in this particular context, the Bologna Process is currently considered the major quality assurance system in higher education.

All interviews explored the issue of improvements in teaching practice (Roxå and Mårtensson 2011). The findings revealed constant internal monitoring of quality, including taking issue with or supporting colleagues who occasionally did not match expected teaching quality. Student evaluations were used in all microcultures as material and inspiration for change, but also analyses of exam questions, collaboration with student representatives, and support in the form of pedagogical courses for teachers. If and when students raised issues concerning teaching quality, they were listened to and taken seriously.

We have a good relationship with the director of studies, uh, with ... he reads all the student evaluations. He gives them to us ... and I read them through, look through them and then ... if there is anything interesting so ... uh ... we simply talk about it. And see if there is anything that can be done. (student, F)

As touched upon already a shared feature among the interviews, both with teachers and students, is that improvements appear to be discussed mainly inside the existing teaching and learning paradigm within each microculture. Thus, there appears to be continuous striving for improvement and development, but without questioning basic assumptions about teaching. In relation to the theoretical framework we introduced

at the start, the microcultures seem to have a continuous way of ensuring their self-monitoring from within, but choices are to a large extent shaped by existing concepts, values and norms.

A policy does prompt change initiatives. The interviews were conducted after the introduction of the European Bologna reform, and the consequent national and institutional quality assurance policy are aligned with it. As described earlier, the most prominent Bologna-related activity was the process of rewriting the syllabi and learning outcomes in every course/module at all educational levels. The investigation revealed that the microcultures responded quite differently to this policy, from re-structuring all their courses (and syllabi) at all levels, and even actively using the formulated learning outcomes in collaborations outside the university, on the one hand, to not really changing anything but the formal course syllabus, on the other.

One interviewee explained how she now uses the written learning outcomes in communication with the companies her group collaborates with:

I send them to the five companies I have recruited into the course now ... they have provided projects for the students this year. And then ... I use them [the learning outcomes in the presentation] ... but also the results of student evaluations and photos showing how we work. (senior, P)

In another microculture, the Bologna Process generated the possibility of dramatic change from the perspective of a director of studies:

I got it. What Bologna was all about, because ... I was at this meeting, and there was [the vice rector of the university] and we were perhaps thirty directors of study down there in [the location]. And she told us how this was supposed to happen and what the important aspects were. And immediately, I got lots of ideas. How I could reorganize and change all our courses. (senior, K)

Later she reveals the origin of these ideas: 'Well, it's an old thing from the sixties.' The ideas were old, but the possibility to realize them appeared during the implementation of the Bologna reform.

However, another example describes the Bologna reform as a wave, even a tsunami. 'Yeah, it was like that, a big thing ... chock, and then ... it's over. And it's really a pity' (senior, F). He describes how his microculture started to discuss how to 'use the syllabi more actively in teaching and so on ... because we currently don't.' But formal, administrative procedures distorted the opportunity. 'It was all about what was allowed or not. It [his group's interest] drowned in this silly discussion, uh.... Lost interest.' The remark reveals a temporal component; the wave is dramatic, but short-lived, but also perceived as a conflict between administrative formalities and local ambitions.

What we glimpse here is an array of responses to a quality reform. The policy, launched largely as a quality enhancement reform, did contribute to change; it constituted a force that in some cases was usable for pursuing changes in enacted teaching practices. But there are few signs of systematic impact. Rather, the different microcultures evaluate the Bologna Treaty in the light of their own long-term ambitions to advance their field. The outcome of this evaluation determines whether they engage or not, whether the policy has an impact or not. It can be seen as an illustration of how the microcultures are the agents in control of the process.

## Discussion

Apparent from the material describing five strong academic microcultures' views on education, is that quality in teaching and student learning is a major concern for them. They illustrate many of the significant features outlined at the beginning of this paper. *Self-monitoring* is exemplified by the array of strategies the microcultures use to advance their practice: they analyse signals coming from the organization and from quality assurance procedures, from audits, from students, from exam results – to mention just a few sources. Their collaborators are found almost everywhere: in the profession, in industry, in other disciplines, and so on – nationally and internationally. Sometimes this interaction is about solving *conflicts* as when students are dissatisfied with the teaching. The interesting feature here is that potential conflicts like these are tackled instantly, before they intensify, and on the basis of high collegial trust. All this is done, it seems, within the tradition developed within the microculture, meaning that the educational paradigm within the microculture set boundaries for what may be conceived of as an improvement or not. The importance of the tradition is stressed repeatedly, as the analysis of the material unfolds. In other words, the *path dependence* sketched out earlier as conditioning for sense-making is clearly visible. However, in these microcultures, the tradition does not petrify the practice; rather the tradition demands development and constant improvement of practice – although mainly within paradigmatic boundaries. The microcultures in this sample orient themselves to the tradition they have created over time, and from this position they actively pay attention to and evaluate various signals coming from the outside, including those from the formal organization. Furthermore, they consider themselves to be the best judges of whether these signals are useful or not for their overall purposes: the advancement of their field, as it relates to the tradition. If not, they respond rather superficially to demands from the formal organization.

In his analysis of distinctive colleges, (Clark 1970/2009) uses the term '*saga*' while discussing the importance of traditions. Saga refers to the history of a college, as the members of the organization perceive it. It is composed of narratives and symbolic material about important events and individuals who have contributed to the growth of the organization at hand. In this discussion we use the term *saga* while referring to the tradition. The *saga* is what stabilizes the microculture and what sets the limits to what can be done, but also demands, in an exemplary way, quality in whatever the individuals do. The *saga*, as we see it, relates directly to the basic assumptions of the culture, its *raison d'être* (Schein 2004).

Traditional organization of quality assurance in higher education institutions is often almost exclusively oriented towards the future. It commonly describes a need, an objective that is arguably worth achieving. It is trying to identify a problem, to change something, hence the orientation towards what should be done, and how, in order to achieve a goal. The *formal organization* (Van Maanen 2007; Ancona et al. 2009) and its attempt to align the organization in order to achieve certain aims, comfortably uses quality assurance policies in order to maximize a prescribed and desired output. Therefore – and hopefully emerging quite clearly – a *saga* and a quality assurance policy are oriented in opposite directions from the standpoint of the present state of affairs. The microcultures described here are all preoccupied with change and development but always within the frames of their *saga*. The formal organization, on the other hand, tries to fuel change and development with reference to the future. By highlighting this organizational contradiction we might better understand why the microcultures react so differently to quality assurance policies from the formal organization.

Quality assurance policies will therefore not be treated with the respect intended by senior managers (or whoever is in charge of such a policy) unless they relate to the tradition, the saga, as the practitioners understand it. There is no authority to be gained over the microcultures described here by sheer reference to the future. Unless quality assurance policies, or similar directives, resonate with their saga, different microcultures will view it as any other kind of material that is possibly usable for them to advance their field. They will not automatically relinquish authority to deans or rectors, who will have no other means than coercion if they want to pursue their intentions.

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# Paper II



# Understanding and influencing teaching and learning cultures at university: a network approach

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Published online: 26 September 2010  
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2010

**Abstract** Academic cultures might be perceived as conservative, at least in terms of development of teaching and learning. Through a lens of network theory this conceptual article analyses the pattern of pathways in which culture is constructed through negotiation of meaning. The perspective contributes to an understanding of culture construction and maintenance with a potential to aid academic developers and others in the endeavour to influence teaching and learning cultures in academia. Throughout the discussion the importance of supporting the weak links between clusters of individuals stands out as a feature to focus upon. We propose that the sheer complexity of culture construction and maintenance in academic organisations is likely to cause any single, isolated attempt for change to fail. Instead, we argue that a multitude of inter-related initiatives over a long period of time is likely to distinguish strategies that are successful in influencing academic teaching and learning cultures.

**Keywords** Academic culture · Teaching and learning development · Network · Leadership

## Introduction

Managing change seems often to be a frustrating task. Van der Wiele et al. (2007, pp. 572–573) argues that change processes in business organisations are likely to become unpredictable and that very few change programmes ever achieve their initial goals. This because internal factors, such as individuals opposing the suggested change, as well as external factors, such as customers and competitors, influence the change process. From our experience, it seems not to be far fetched to suggest that academic organisations have much in common with business organisations in this respect. Understanding mechanisms

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within these internal and external factors thus seems important for understanding change processes within academic organisations.

The focus of this text is on internal factors, more precisely how teaching and learning cultures might be influenced. Teaching and learning cultures have already been described and discussed in depth by Trowler (2005, 2008), and Trowler and Cooper (2002). In this text the existence of teaching learning cultures will therefore be taken as a point of departure. However, before we continue the discussion about influencing teaching and learning cultures, we need to establish a firm understanding of how organisational culture can be conceived.

### **What is organisational culture?**

In this text we will focus on culture as a process (Ancona et al. 2009). This approach to culture focuses on the *sense-making processes* within a group. From this perspective culture is ‘a set of meanings, and values shared by a group of people’ (Alvesson 2002, p. 29). The shared norms, beliefs, values, and traditions of the group guide the sense-making processes and produces behaviour and products somewhat different from those of other groups. When aspects of shared norms et cetera become taken for granted by the individuals enacting them, these aspects tend to become invisible to them (Trowler and Cooper 2002). The culture can therefore often be regarded as a conserving force, meaning that it preserves practice. When change is asked for, it can appear as an obstacle, but it also defends core values and practice in harsh times.

Organisations are, however, rarely culturally homogenous. Each organisation hosts *subcultures* that may more or less explicitly oppose the norms and value systems dictated by the predominant culture. Regardless of the nature of the subculture, expressions of opposition to the ruling culture are mainly located ‘back-stage’ where the listeners are carefully chosen and approved of (Goffman 2000). Consequently, what we often talk about as *the* culture is in fact the over-arching, predominant culture. This predominant, ruling culture needs to be actively maintained in order to survive e.g. by rewarding/punishing certain behaviour or reinforcing myths or histories illustrating the culture’s core values. What survival strategy is used depends e.g. on if the culture supports growth and initiatives from its members or if it is a conservative culture where, for instance, a few members benefit more than the many (Ancona et al. 2009).

As indicated above, individuals within a culture have the option to follow their personal intentions and act as knowledgeable agents (Giddens 2004). An individual agent might thus make observations, interpretations, and/or actions that have the potential to challenge the norms and beliefs of a predominant culture. But such behaviours do not automatically change the culture. As the knowledge of the agents is limited, agents might fail to see the relevance of the new, potentially challenging observations or for other reasons decide not to act according to them. Furthermore, challenges may mobilise defenders of the ruling culture since the effort invested in a culture and the experienced benefit of belonging to the group might be substantial.

From this somewhat theoretical and general perspective on culture, we will explore culture in relation to academic teaching. A cultural approach to change in academic teaching and learning would mean to focus on the norms, values, shared assumptions, et cetera, that guide university teachers and their practice. If such an effort would succeed it would show itself in changed classroom experiences as well as in changes in the ways academic teachers talk about and interpret teaching, learning and assessment practices.

## Academic culture and network theory

Culture as described above is constructed and maintained as members act and interact, thereby establishing the meaning of what is said and done. This is reified in memory and in artefacts and is subsequently incorporated in the history of the group (Alvesson 2002; Ancona et al. 2009; Wenger 1999). Conversations where meaning is negotiated are thus crucial components of cultural construction and maintenance. But conversations are elusive. They take place in many different situations and under many different conditions. Even when people try their best to say what they mean there is no guarantee that this meaning is correlated to the meaning constructed by the listener. Even if these conversations were accurately documented, it would not necessarily help while trying to *influence* the culture. So, instead of trying to describe the culture in detail we will try to map the conversational pathways from a meta-perspective by applying network theory.

Academic cultures are often described as collegial with an emphasis on the archaic term peer. In a group of peers, where everybody is supposedly equal, everyone would be treated in the same way, and be given the same opportunities. However, everyday experience and network theory contradicts this assumption. Instead, an academic network is stratified in terms of status and opportunity to negotiate and establish meaning. The focus here is not how this status is earned but the fact that differences in status do exist, and that the network does not entirely follow the principle of peers interacting with peers on an equal basis.

In most social networks status is assigned to a limited number of individuals who by virtue of this status occupy the centre, leaving the periphery to the others (Newman et al. 2006; Shirky 2008; Watts 2004). While mapping out the pathways along which information flows, different patterns emerge: The central individuals have access to more information than others (Hemphälä 2008) and participate more often in discussions where meaning is negotiated. They function as *hubs* do in a network of computers. More information travels through their spheres of perception than through the spheres of more peripheral members of the network. The hubs therefore become key-players in the cultural process where meaning and values are assigned to different types of behaviour.

Another important feature of social networks is that individuals do not communicate in the same way with everybody. Each individual belongs to a smaller and denser network. More time is spent with these few; the communication is more emotional and characterised by reciprocal confidence (Pearce 2008). In network theory these relations constitutes the individual's *strong links* (Granovetter 1973). But the smaller network in turn is situated in a context of many other small networks each connected to the others by *weak links* lacking the type of emotional characteristics of the strong links.

Thus, individuals bound together with strong links and dense interactions form small groups, *clusters*, within a larger network. The gaps between clusters are linked together by *bridges*, which tend to be connected to a few individuals in each cluster, the *hubs*, who have more links than the average person in the networks. In general terms the proportion of hubs in a social network typically follow the 20/80 rule (Barabási 2003): a clear minority (about 20%) is far more active in terms of number of links than the majority (80%).

Network theory applied in an academic environment provides an opportunity to understand communication pathways where meaning is negotiated. Through these pathways culture is constructed, maintained and possibly changed. Mapping these networks may not give us a clear idea about what is talked about in different clusters and bridges, but that may not be crucial. Since the construction of meaning in a conversation is dependent on who is taking part, *a way to influence culture would be to influence the communication*

*pathways*. Thereby new people can be engaged in the discussion, and new members of a network can take on the role of being a hub. If this is achieved, both the flow of information and the negotiation of meaning will be affected.

Before we continue the discussion about how that could be accomplished, we have to assess to what extent these ideas from network theory are applicable in the academic environment. Do links, clusters, hubs, and bridges exist in academia?

In *Academic Tribes and Territories* (Becher and Trowler 2001) the very title signals that members of tribes or social clusters inhabit the higher education continent. The authors claim that academic researchers tend to rely on two different networks, one small and one large. The small network consists of up to a dozen individuals. This is where new ideas are tested, serious problems are debated, and the first versions of research papers are discussed, features indicating dense interaction. The large network sometimes contains hundreds of individuals, and is mainly used for referencing and orientation, that is interaction with less density.

Further, Barabási (2003, p. 49) refers to studies on networks of researchers. He concludes: ‘the day-to-day business of science is conducted in densely linked clusters of scientists connected by occasional weak ties’. Similar results emerge from research exploring the relations between different communities of practice in higher education research (Tight 2008).

Roxå and Mårtensson (2009a, b) investigated how university teachers discuss experiences from teaching in small ‘significant networks’. Teachers in that study reported that they selected these conversational peers carefully and they emphasised time allocated, emotions invested, and reciprocity as characteristics within these small networks.

Given this, there is no reason to believe that academic networks differ drastically from other networks as described generally in network theory. Academics do form clusters where the links are stronger, and they orient themselves towards a wider community to which they have weaker links. In research, senior members act as hubs providing their personal network to be utilized as bridges to a much larger network, for the benefit of younger researchers. In relation to teaching and learning, the role of hubs is not easily defined, as the hubs might be formal or informal. The mandate associated with formal roles such as “head of department”, might empower an individual to become a hub. Recent research on academic leadership has underlined the growing importance of leaders in teaching and learning (Gibbs et al. 2008; Kallenberg 2007; Middlehurst 2007; Ramsden et al. 2007; Simkins 2005; Turnbull and Edwards 2005). Informal hubs might be individuals without any formal power or mandate but who nevertheless are respected and trusted by many colleagues.

A striking aspect of communication within academic clusters is the possible degree of specificity (Feito 2002), which provides a high degree of complexity in the interaction. This points towards a possibility that academic clusters are characterised by an exceptional density. The implication is twofold: (1) It allows for discussions using highly sophisticated intellectual tools, theories, models and concepts. It is therefore demanding to participate in terms of required pre-knowledge and skills. Consequently, induction of new members is time-consuming. (2) The use of such particular intellectual tools can also be used to exclude people from the communication. Consequently, the degree of complexity can very well be an important feature of academic communication in general, and a critical feature when we address the question on how to influence these links, bridges, clusters, and hubs that together form the communication patterns of the academic culture.

### **Nuances in networks: a narrative**

As an illustration, rather than a representative sample, of the complex dynamics of communication within academic networks, we will here look at a Department of Chemical Engineering as experienced by one of the authors. It should be noted that what follows is a simplified description.

Senior lecturer in Chemical Engineering:

Before a voluntary merge of three different departments I belonged to a unit that was divided into a number of research groups that had little contact with each other. The scientific discussions open to me were almost entirely limited to discussion within the research group including scientists outside our department with whom we collaborated. The contacts with such scientists were often initially mediated by the senior members of our research group. Discussions within the research group were typically vivid and multitopic and often included pedagogy, although influenced by systems thinking rather than educational theory. Many things that were said within the group, e.g. regarding pedagogy, were socially impossible to articulate within the unit as a whole. At the same time I also experienced, especially during my time as a doctoral student, subtle changes in the discussions regarding research depending on whether the two supervisors were present or not.

We see here examples of nuances in front-stage and back-stage discussions, senior members acting as hubs, providing access to a larger (national/international) network as well as a densely linked cluster of scientists that only partly overlap with the organisational unit.

When the units merged, deliberate attempts were made to increase networking between the former units, including joint department seminars, moving of offices and enlarging one of the two coffee rooms. My office moved to the former domains of one of the other units and I started to teach a course that previously belonged to that unit. Initially, I was the key programmer in the research group I belonged to, but the financing was declining rapidly. Consequently, the group soon started to fall apart and I, partly as a survival strategy, started to turn my focus to pedagogy, which eventually resulted in me working part time as chairman of an education board and as a pedagogical developer.

Although judging the causes behind how ones own links form is difficult and prone to bias, I would nevertheless claim that there were three different topic arenas involved: social, science, and pedagogy in that order, both chronologically and with regard to their importance for the formation of the links. I found the new environment very welcoming, but we initially rarely touched upon research issues.

As these new social links formed and we started to get to know each other better, the coffee room discussions more frequently touched upon research issues. Based on my former research experience, I rather frequently argued for increased usage of a certain technique in uncertainty analysis. One doctoral student got interested and started using it and that was my first clear scientific link with my new colleagues. As it turned out, the research group he belonged to had much more in common with my previous research than we first thought.

Note here the deliberate attempts to influence the clusters by creating new links within the department and that it despite these attempts took time before research related

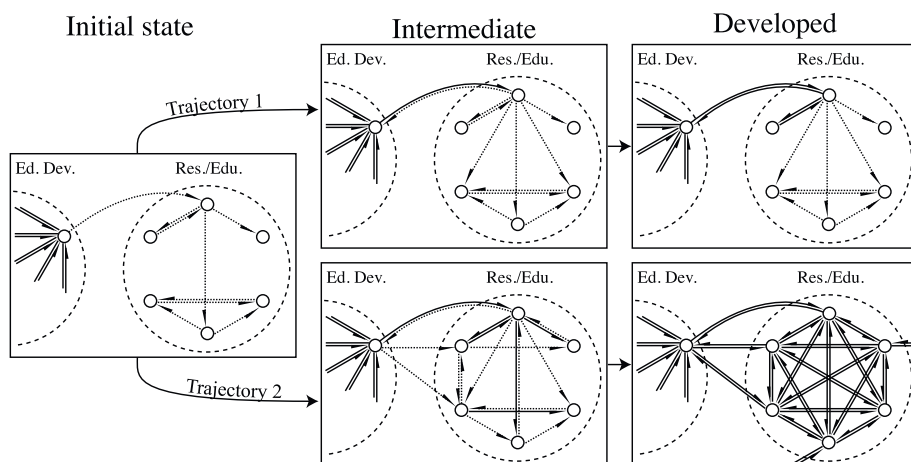
conversations were common. Just as induction of new members is likely to be time-consuming, so is merging of existing networks. A change in funding is in this case an external factor as it is outside the immediate control of department management decisions.

Throughout time, the increasing number of social and scientific links made me feel an integral part of the network. Since many knew I also worked with educational issues I started getting questions about rules and regulations related to higher education. Slowly I began to initiate discussions regarding pedagogical issues and to support similar initiatives by others. However, the back-stage characteristics of the coffee-room conversation when dealing with social or research issues were not always present in the discussions of pedagogy. Once I tried to initiate a discussion on exam design by saying that I sometimes find it difficult to determine from a written exam how much a student really understands. One teacher replied matter-of-factly, “That is no problem for an experienced teacher”, a response which caused me to avoid further discussions with that person for some time. However, other times I was deeply impressed by colleagues who during coffee breaks initiated discussions regarding rather sensitive, personal issues related to teaching.

The narrative illustrates how a formal role, such as being a pedagogical developer, might empower an individual to become a hub in matters related to that role. It seems likely that the established social links facilitated this process. The narrative also illustrates the importance of mutual trust and respect in back-stage discussions.

Despite the fact that the narrative above is simplified and furthermore only describes what happened from the narrator’s perspective, a whole series of links changed over time as new network constellations emerged. This complexity makes the process difficult to analyse. For analytical reasons we therefore suggest a schematic illustration (Fig. 1) of two hypothetical outcomes of a process initiated by a contact between a member of an academic network and an academic developer. The illustration also relates to what we previously have labelled trajectory 1 and trajectory 2 in the scholarship of teaching and learning (Roxå et al. 2008).

In Fig. 1, the dynamics of conversations regarding teaching and learning are schematically illustrated. Links related to discussions of pedagogic issues are drawn as arrows,



**Fig. 1** A schematic illustration of the dynamics of pedagogic conversations

individuals as circles. Discussions concerning other issues, e.g. research, are not included. Initial state: An individual in a group of researchers which has some limited but superficial educational conversations (dotted arrows), gets in contact with an academic developer (well connected in his or her network). In trajectory 1 (intermediate state), the link between the individual and the academic developer deepens (solid arrow) and it becomes a two-way communication where both parties learn something. Developed state: Other colleagues with whom the individual, the hub, has two-way communications are engaged. But not much happens with the communication with the other individuals in the group, as the pedagogic ideas, which the hub tries to convey, may not be considered as relevant. In trajectory 2 (intermediate state) other individuals in the group also get in contact with an educational developer (the same or a new). This influences their relevance structure and makes it easier to create new and more elaborate links also within the group. If taken further (developed state), this might lead to deep conversations regarding pedagogic issues among all members of the group, it may even lead to individuals creating new links around pedagogical matters with individuals outside the group.

### How to influence the conversational patterns?

In which direction do we want to influence the cultures of teaching and learning in academia? The obvious, and typically academic, answer is probably that it depends. Different institutions have different cultural profiles and significant features (McNay 2002). The historical background might call for different approaches as well as the institutions' degree of research intensity and its societal setting. The particular objectives must therefore be contextually adapted. Even so, higher education also has some global similarities, as expressed in the growing literature about the 'scholarship of teaching and learning' (Boyer 1990; Huber and Hutchings 2005), according to which teachers in higher education should be encouraged to reflect on and document student learning with the support of theory for peer-review purposes. We argue for a development in this direction.

Culture is, as discussed above, constructed during practice and during communication (Alvesson 2002; Ancona et al. 2009). Here we explore the possibility of influencing those processes by influencing the *pathways* for the communication (strong and weak links, hubs, clusters, and bridges). Let us consider some different alternatives to do that:

- (1) Influence the hubs
- (2) Influence the clusters
- (3) Influence the pathways for information
- (4) Influence the skills of sending and receiving information
- (5) Reorganise.

These approaches, used to a various degree by academic developers, all have their advantages and limitations. Before we comment on them, remember that we are considering cultural change, which implies a few important things. Firstly, everybody within a culture is affected by a cultural change (Alvesson 2002), even a manager who is often in a position to start the five processes listed above. A manager should execute power only with caution. Measures that deviate too drastically from cultural norms may backfire on the person implementing them. Secondly, since culture is a complex system (Ancona et al. 2009; Senge 2006) actions driving change in one direction will most likely be counteracted by balancing forces from within the culture; and the result of a specific action may not show itself until after some time of delay. In between action and effect many other things

will take place. Both these properties will, within a complex system, cause countless unintended and unforeseen outcomes, just as in the narrative above. Consequently change will in general appear chaotic, unpredictable, and slow. Let us keep that in mind, and return to the five possibilities to influence the pathways.

#### Influence the hubs

Barabási (2003, p. 237) states: ‘While the dense interconnections within each module [cluster] help the efficient accomplishment of specific tasks, the hubs coordinate the communication between the many parallel functions’. This implies that although clusters of academic teachers do a good job, they are still in need of guidance and coordination. This is also supported by Trevelyan (2001), who studied academic researchers’ perception of leadership and autonomy. One strategy would therefore be to educate middle managers, such as programme directors, heads of departments, or subject coordinators. Literature also highlights the important and complex role of middle managers in academia (Anderson et al. 2008; Ramsden et al. 2007). However, normally and somewhat surprisingly the hubs do not drive change. On the contrary, as described by Becker (cited in Granovetter 1973) they appear conservative and defend their position by playing safe even though it might mean blocking productive development. This is explained by the fact that the hubs get their status from the other cluster members. If the hub drives change, the other members may degrade his or her status. Hence the somewhat conservative nature sometimes displayed by hubs.

#### Influence the clusters

Wenger (1999) and the subsequent literature on ‘communities of practice’ deal with how small working-units develop their practice and create a shared history of learning. One strategy therefore is to encourage such clusters with resources and ask of them to disseminate what they are doing to others. This strategy, also visible in the narrative above, is deployed at different scales in higher education, for instance in England by the creation of ‘Subject Teaching and Learning Networks’,<sup>1</sup> or in the US as ‘Faculty Learning Communities’ (Cox 2004). The purpose is to create development around the shared interest for a subject/discipline/issue. Granovetter (1973, p. 1373), however, advises against this strategy. It could lead to the development of isolated cliques, such that each person is tied to every other in his [or her] cluster and to none outside. It is difficult to estimate how large a risk this is, but an excessive commitment to this strategy could mean severe drawbacks. Clusters, or groups of clusters that pay little attention to what goes on outside their own boundaries may be at risk because of unawareness of changes in the context. Such isolationistic tendencies did appear at a CDIO conference one of us attended in Linköping, Sweden in 2006, CDIO being a movement (group of clusters) within Engineering Educations: Most presenters at the conference referred exclusively to pedagogic literature from within the CDIO community. On the other hand, it is within the clusters that the actual practice—teaching being one—is performed. So, supporting clusters or groups of clusters is again an act of balance. Senge (2006) in his comment to this risk suggests the establishment of a strong, shared vision within the archipelago of clusters.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/networks/subjectcentres> (2008-10-06).



### Influence the pathways for information

It is tempting to influence how information flows and how it is used, by making everything available to everybody; a democratic strategy, as it appears, and further, much possible through information technology. However, research about complex networks shows that this too could make things worse (Barabási 2003). An increased demand on the many to raise their awareness of all available information may disturb the practitioners' focus on their practice, here teaching. In order to avoid this distraction the practitioners will most likely, as a defence mechanism, rely even more on the hubs to sort and prioritise information. The likely result, therefore, is increased power among the hubs and a relative decrease of influence among the practitioners. This threatens again to partition the organisation, to alienate the practitioners even more from the sources of information, and to reward even more power to a group already associated by conservatism (see “[Influence the hubs](#)”).

### Influence the skills of sending and receiving information

This strategy resembles the one above, but instead of changing the information flow, its focus is to develop the capability of the individuals to process information horizontally and vertically within the organisation. While trying to improve communication horizontally, we must keep in mind that intensified communication within one stratum of the organisation could mean a further support of a powerful layer of meaning interpreters (hubs) with emerging shared interests. In the long run this can prevent the vertical flow of information in the organisation and therefore alter the locus of power. Such a scenario can distort the senior management's possibility to influence the practice—here the teaching.

One can also improve communication top-down by summarising important aspects in policies and plans (a strategy widely used). The impact on higher education through policies has, however, been limited (Bauer et al. 1999; Hedin 2004; Stensaker 2006). It has led to what Newton (2003) calls ‘policy-overload’, where individuals are exhausted by an endless stream of new directives.

A bottom-up strategy where experiences made by individual practitioners are communicated upwards is also problematic. If all individuals in an organisation would send accounts about their practice to the managers, the sheer number of messages would be overwhelming. Such information needs to be aggregated e.g. through surveys. Investigations like these, however, are often experienced as based on terms dictated from above, and therefore not considered relevant by practitioners. Furthermore, they are published as aggregated results, which makes it difficult for the practitioners to identify themselves with the content (Ancona et al. 2009).

### Reorganise: new roles, new rewards and new opportunities

This strategy is what Ancona et al. (2009) call change by *strategic design*, meaning a top down, well planned and thought through change process purposed to rearrange both roles and links between subunits and individuals. It means assigning new tasks to people and shifting their location within the organisation. The authors point out that this type of drastic redesign in an organisation is often risky and almost always requires a severe and palpable threat to the organisation's survival in order to be successful. In higher education institutions this strategy is sometimes used while implementing new teaching paradigms, such as problem-based learning. The aftermath is often an ongoing struggle to prevent practice from slipping back into old habits (Trowler 1998). It should be noted that structural



changes *can* also be initiated bottom up, as was the case in the narrative above, in which case the dynamics is likely different from that of a top down process.

### Cluster to cluster and the importance of trust

So, what is left? From the literature on network theory as well as from the literature on organisational culture two things emerge as important: *Trust*, and the location of the *weak links*. These two things can make the initiatives listed above fail or succeed. Let us start with weak links since they also appear to be the key to trust.

The title of Granovetter's article (1973), *The Strength of Weak Ties*, mirrors the message. It is the weak ties (or 'links' in the terminology used above) between clusters that create opportunities, inspire new ideas, and develop the practices. The perspective is consistent with Wenger's theory on communities of practice (Wenger 1999; Wenger et al. 2002). Communities will, over time, refine their practice, but they always run the risk of being so ingrained in their own perspective that it results in isolation. The organisation thereby runs the risk of being partitioned.

Wenger suggests several options to counterbalance this risk: Boundary objects (reified knowledge that flows from one cluster to another, in academia often texts), brokers (individuals who participate, often peripherally, in several clusters and thereby carry ideas and practices from one cluster to another, often academic developers), and the creation of arenas (conferences, projects, commissions et cetera) where members of different clusters can meet and focus on problems or areas of common interest.

In order to link clusters directly to clusters, we need practitioners with the interest and the capacity to do so from the centre of one cluster to the centre of another. We also need to lower the risk of doing so by creating experiences of *trust*. In higher education the importance—but also the lack—of trust has been pointed out by Kezar (2004), who summarises, after going through several studies on leadership and governance in higher education: 'Unless there are relationships of respect and trust, people do not share ideas.'

How then can trust be constructed, nourished and supported in an academic context where open-minded and critical discussions about teaching and learning are scarce (Becher and Trowler 2001; Roxå and Mårtensson, 2009a, b)? Feito (2002) studied academic seminars where the participants truly experienced inspiration and intellectual achievements in collaboration with others. He labels this experience '*intellectual intimacy*', a state where participants share a sense of what is being explored and share the ambition to do so. Similar accounts have appeared in the research on university teachers' significant networks (Roxå and Mårtensson 2009b), significant because it is where academic teachers allow themselves to be influenced by others. It is in interaction with a few significant others (Berger and Luckmann 1966) that the understanding of the teaching and learning reality is constructed and maintained. Therefore, it is most likely that trust grows outwards from the clusters, or the significant relations, and into the gaps between clusters, making the constructions of bridges possible. Thus, trust cannot be instrumentally installed; it has to be based in personal experience (Luhmann 2005).

### Conclusion

Network theory offers a perspective for academic developers and others who strive to influence academic teaching and learning cultures. It makes it possible to discern

communication pathways in which cultural meaning is negotiated. Thereby it becomes possible to construct a more multifaceted understanding of how academic cultures are constructed and maintained.

Based in a tentative discussion about a few strategies used by academic developers we would advise against relying solely on the individuals referred to as the hubs. These individuals have their status and identity reinforced by the other members of the clusters. Consequently hubs tend to act as a conservative force as their status in the culture might be undermined if they act against the culture. This does not mean that the hubs should be neglected as change agents, on the contrary. But academic developers should be cautious about relying *solely* on them.

Elinor Ostrom has, in her exploration of the commons, showed the importance of trust and useful information. By a multitude of empirical data she shows how trust is constructed through face-to-face interaction, that information is actively retrieved and transformed into knowledge by members of a shared context and that much of this information remains hidden from external observers (Ostrom 1990). In parallel with her findings this analysis of academic culture through a lens of network theory suggests a similar emphasis on trust and information flow. Trust grows within the culture through weak links which allow information to flow directly from one cluster into another, without passing and thereby being filtered by one or several hubs. To include initiatives for influencing the skills of sending and receiving information is thus likely important in the long term. The objective is to encourage individual cluster members to interact directly with members of other clusters without management losing contact with the organisation. To achieve this, support is needed in terms of establishment of arenas and deployment of rules guiding the interaction.

But most importantly, we argue that the sheer complexity of culture construction and maintenance will likely cause any single, isolated attempt for change to fail. This since (1) its fate likely depends on the position of weak links, (2) the difficulty in acquiring knowledge about these links and (3) that links may change over time. Rather we deem it likely that a multitude of inter-related initiatives over a long period of time distinguish any strategy successful in influencing academic teaching and learning cultures. However, even if a multitude of inter-related initiatives were necessary to make a change happen it might still look as if one of the initiatives succeeded and the others failed since our ability to acquire crucial information regarding the dynamics of these complex systems is limited. Thus, if our argument is correct, proving its validity empirically may be very difficult.

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# Paper III



# Why experiences gained during academic teaching fail to support organisational learning in higher education

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## **Abstract**

Individual university teachers' experiences from teaching tend to have a limited impact on colleagues and on the organisation as a whole. A common explanation for this refers to the private nature of teaching. This study investigates the phenomenon by interviewing 15 academic teachers about their experiences formulated as narratives derived from teaching in a language foreign to them, and to most of their students. The results show that these teachers do formulate experiences in the format of narratives and that they communicate these experiences inside their respective local collegial context. However, the narratives do not travel beyond the borders of the local context. It is argued that this is due to an experience among the teachers that colleagues outside the collegial context are uninterested.

## **Introduction**

Stakeholders in many positions throughout the world strive to improve academic teaching practices. A recurrent problem is the perceived private nature of pedagogical practices (Shulman 1993) and the subsequent difficulty in encouraging collegial learning among academic teachers (Pace 2004). For instance, funding is often provided for innovation in academic teaching, but just as often evaluations of such programmes show that the organisational learning is limited with almost no effect on the organisation as a whole. A teacher innovates and his or her students may experience great teaching, but when the funding ends and the teacher moves on to other duties the teaching goes back to normal (Graham 2012). This implies not only a potential waste of money but also a conceptual problem: In what way can higher education organisations be conceptualised so that this phenomenon is explained. In short: How can an understanding be developed of the processes that account for this so that higher education organisations become better learning organisations?

It is stated that within a learning organisation, colleagues learn from, inspire, and critique each other (Senge 2006). One key feature in such an organisation is the ability to identify, formulate, and communicate/share experiences from colleague to colleague for developmental purposes (Döös and Wilhelmson 2011), but also a perceived interest in experiences gained. A key feature in these processes consists of the various, more or less independent, local sub-contexts that make up the entire organisation. Most organisations exhibit such a pattern of subcultures that overlap and interact in complicated ways (Alvesson 2011). These subcultures develop their own traditions, habits, and recurrent practices and emerge as collegial clusters in which individuals interact more frequently and in richer ways through *stronger ties* than with members of other clusters (Barabási 2003; Watts 2003; Cross and Parker 2004).

It has further been shown that such clusters display a remarkable resilience to external pressure (Axelrod 1981). They also have strong effects on professional identities, something that strengthens the boundaries between clusters even further. These features imply a risk for the organisation to become partitioned, that is, that the clusters will develop into isolated silos. This constitutes a state that leaves the organisation vulnerable to external pressure (Granovetter 1973) as well as hampers development. A major reason for this is that communication across cluster boundaries becomes meagre and scarce. Under such conditions, experiences gained by organisational members in a local cluster have a tendency to remain there: they do not travel across cluster borders for the benefit of others. To counter such development is a major task for organisational leaders.



The overall perspective presented above where socially formed and loosely coupled collegial contexts populate the meso-level of organisations has also been found relevant for higher education organisations. Repeated research has confirmed the cluster metaphor in higher education and the role local traditions play for how academic teaching or related practices are performed. Jawitz (2009) showed how disciplinary communities in a South African university developed different strategies for assessing students. Walsh (2010) reported how the success of overseas doctoral students in the UK depended on locally formed group climates. Trowler (2008) discussed how different local teaching traditions play a part during faculty mergers. Renc-Roe and Roxå (2014) showed how internationalisation means different things in different collegial contexts in a research-intensive university. Lindblom-Ylänne et al. (2006) reported how academic teachers adapt their teaching to locally formed traditions while teaching at two different universities. Mårtensson, Roxå, and Stensaker (2012) showed how local collegial contexts responded differently to policies released by university management and how these contexts referred to their various local traditions when describing the reasons for their responses.

It is important that the existence such collegial contexts not are perceived as only negative. Instead they vary considerably in their ability to function well. For the purpose of this investigation, however, it is the mere existence of collegial contexts that is important, not their respective degree of sophistication. These variation, however, is most likely highly relevant for subsequent research in this area.

Higher education organisations, like other knowledge intensive organisations can thus to a large extent be understood as a composite of many semi-independent collegial contexts. These can, for example, be disciplinary or departmental contexts. To counter the silo effect described above, it is important to understand how and why information describing experiences from teaching flows or does not flow across these contextual boundaries. When it happens, when a piece of information does flow from one cluster to another, it is hypothesised that it does so through *weak ties*, less frequent interaction, linking the various collegial contexts to each other (Granovetter 1973; Wenger 1999). Thus, in a learning organisation, ideas, experiences, and innovations may or may not flow through the weak ties from one collegial context and be picked up and made use of by local members inside another collegial context.

Additionally, it is accepted in today's organisational research that when information flows within an organisation, the people in the collegial contexts should not be viewed as passive recipients of information. Instead they actively search for, select, and translate material (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Bamber et al. 2009; Eriksson-Zetterquist 2009). This tendency is even more prominent in knowledge intensive organisations (Hannah and Lester 2009). Accordingly, if and when ideas, information, or other pieces of material flow inside an organisation, they do so not as fixed objects; instead, they are picked up and transformed by members of local collegial contexts. The process depends on how the local members perceive their specific local needs (Mårtensson, Roxå, and Stensaker 2012).

A question to be answered at this point is: If information in an organisation flows across the borders described above, in what format does it flow? Here it is appropriate to make a parallel to research practices. Research is also often performed in collegial contexts, such as research groups or research communities. Here information flows as articles, books, or other formats found to be appropriate. Since such developed channels for sharing experiences from teaching mostly do not exist, this research focuses on plain descriptions. It investigates whether teaching experiences are formulated as narratives and told to colleagues. Such narratives do not have to follow a specified format; they are simply descriptions of events or episodes told by one teacher to another teacher. If narratives describing experiences from

teaching exist, they potentially can be told and retold across the borders of collegial contexts and thus support organisational learning.

The overarching question is empirical: Do experiences travel in this particular organisation? But it is also conceptual: Can the theoretical perspective introduced above aid our understanding of higher education organisations in relation to academic teaching?

The research presented here explores whether experiences gained from teaching by teachers move across the borders of collegial contexts within in a specific higher education organisation. The following questions guide the inquiry.

1. Are experiences gained by teachers during teaching in the international classroom formulated as narratives?
2. How do these narratives relate to the metaphor of collegial contexts/clusters?
3. Do narratives, if they exist, travel beyond the borders of the local collegial contexts?
4. Are the narratives picked up and translated by members of other collegial contexts?

## **Method**

### ***Research context***

The context at hand is a Swedish faculty of engineering comprising 9600 students (including postgraduate students) and 1500 employees. For over a decade, internationalisation has been a top priority for the university leadership. The faculty in question has promoted more teaching in English to allow for more international students. Thus, an increasing number of postgraduate and undergraduate courses (modules) are being taught in English. In 2012, more than 300 courses were taught in English allowing 436 international students to study at the faculty. It is an explicit strategy to offer an increasing number of courses in English to both achieve internationalisation 'at home' and to prepare all students for future engineering workplaces in a globalised world. In fact, the university and the faculty in question have been champions of internationalisation and have used it to attract both home and foreign students and to further support the strategic orientation of the whole university as a world-class university alongside its research orientation (Renc-Roe and Roxå 2014)

In this situation of more international classrooms, new pedagogical circumstances have to be dealt with by individual teachers. This includes not only personal preparation for teaching in a foreign language but often also redesigning of courses, assignments, examinations, and pedagogical strategies for dealing with mixed-language student groups. The current study focuses on whether experiences acquired during these novel circumstances are formulated, made available, and picked up by teachers active in other parts of the organisation.

### ***Respondents***

Fifteen academic teachers were interviewed (in English) about their experiences of teaching in English, not a primary language for them or for most of their students. Open-ended questions were asked about experiences related to the international classroom in general and specifically about experiences formulated as narratives – stories describing episodes in the international classroom. In addition, probing questions were asked about experiences originating from outside the individual teacher's local collegial context. The interviewees were selected because they all had experience of teaching in the international classroom and because they represented a variety of disciplines in the faculty. The latter was important since the research aimed at detecting whether experiences from one part of the faculty surfaced in another part, that is, whether experiences gained from teaching travelled in the organisation.

The interviews, conducted in English took place in a location chosen by the respondent and lasted for 30 to 60 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviewer was a person previously unknown to the interviewees (second author of this paper).

The assumption was that the experiences from the international classroom would be formulated as narratives that travel within the organisation and thereby contribute to organisational learning. If so, the interviewees would be able to recount events that had taken place outside their own collegial context.

### ***Narratives***

Narratives sometimes refer to life biographies or what is also called life-narratives. They may also describe much shorter events. In this research a narrative is a description of an episode in relation to the international classroom. It is a description of an event or a chain of events where one person is or several persons are involved in something that has to do with teaching in the international classroom.

Narratives are said not only to pass on information but they also ‘meet people’s psychological needs in coping with life, or help a group to crystallize or define an issue, view, stance or perspective’ (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011). Narrative inquiry is said to be particularly useful when researching how people make sense of their lives through the selective stories they tell about noteworthy episodes (Cousin 2009). They are experiences packaged as stories describing events with a personal meaning attached to them (Webster and Mertova 2007). Narratives mostly, but not always, have a start and an end with a certain dramaturgical development centred around an individual or a group (Gabriel 2004). A narrative, thus, conveys reality in a personalised way where aspects are used or left out as a result of a personal choice by the narrator.

The methodological assumption here is that narratives emerge inside a social context of academic teachers as carriers of meaning, describing episodes in the international classroom. They can then potentially ‘travel’ in the organisation through the weak ties linking collegial contexts to each other. A narrative can assumedly be translated, listen to, retold, and altered, as it is adapted to the local needs of another collegial context within the organisation.

### ***Rumours***

Rumours are closely related to narratives. Rumours have been found to play a multifaceted role in organisational and cultural life (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007). In this context they are considered as a variant of narratives since they display many of the same features. They too contain experiences gained by individuals. One distinctive difference is that they are unverifiable. Rumours encompass ‘little or no authoritative evidence or official information to establish its credibility’ (Pendleton 1998). While narratives often reveal information that is at least in theory possible to verify, rumours, due to the way they are communicated, explicitly or implicitly signal that they are unverifiable. Rumours ‘are hearsay; they are told, believed, and passed on not because of the weight of the evidence but because of the expectations by tellers that they are true in the first place’ (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009). In this research, rumours are relevant as they too pass on information about experiences. However, because they are unverifiable, they pass on information less suitable to learn from than do narratives.

### ***Analysis***

The transcripts were read by the two authors independently in search of narratives, especially ones originating from other collegial contexts than the interviewee’s. The initial results were compared and discussed and compiled in the results section.

## Results

This section comprises three subsections relating to the four research questions formulated in the introduction. In each section, the specific question is answered by reference to the empirical material. Each aspect is illustrated by quotes from the interviews.

### *1. Are experiences gained by teachers during teaching in the international classroom formulated as narratives?*

All interviewees were able and willing to tell narratives describing teaching experiences gained from teaching in the international classroom. Thirty-three relevant narratives were identified in the material. These describe observations, problems, and solutions related to teaching in a foreign language and teaching in the international classroom. Sometimes the teacher is the central character, sometimes the students or someone else. A commonality for all narratives is that they are more or less complex descriptions of personal experience and formulated in a personal way.

- *Respondent:* When I taught international students, that was the X course, we had this thing that we, eh put the teams together; they worked in teams in that course. In the beginning two by two, and we designed the teams. And then there were some rather interesting cultural conflicts, like for example eh, let's see, a French guy and a Portuguese eh woman in the same group. And, eh the French guy, they had, they had to sit by computers and solve com.... eh, modelling tasks, and the French guy obviously knew nothing of computers and the Portuguese girl which was like 30cm shorter and a woman knew a lot. We could see that immediately. But, eh the French guy didn't allow her to use the...
- *Interviewer:* The skills?
- *R:* The keyboard.
- *I:* Oh the keyboard. Oh I see.
- *R:* So she had to sit next to him and say, maybe you should... Hahaha! And maybe you should... So there, there was both his, hum, well they have basically the same culture but it's also this thing with, eh, gender perspectives involved. (Respondent 3)

*R:* So, so, and this year we actually had local student wa, walking out on a course because they didn't want to... .. collaborate with the s..., with the, the international students ... during that period there had become you know, the locals and the foreigners, and they had... Two days into the course they said no we will not take this course. And I think eight local students out of twelve or fourteen left the course. .... they had felt that they would, they had carried the, the, the international students too much... (Respondent 4)

- *R:* And we al, actually we here we also had eh, some, experimental work maybe are not correct but we gave one of the, or our big mandatory course for the civil engineers students we gave in English a, a couple of years, because we had a teacher exchange, so we had a professor came in from Canada and gave that course one year in English, and then the students became interested so, we gave that course in English three years I think. Hum, but then we found some students weren't too happy about it so we, we asked all the students, and it was about fifty/fifty, something like that, whether they wanted just continue doing so, we said okay they don't want it, let's not do it.
- *I:* Aha, so you dropped the course, or you switched to Swedish?
- *R:* Yea, we switched to Swedish. (Respondent 8)

These three examples illustrate how teachers formulate for themselves authentic narratives describing aspects of teaching and learning situations. It supports the assumption that teachers are indeed able to formulate their experiences as narratives. In the context of this research the narratives are examples of the kind of material that potentially can be told to others and thus be used for learning purposes by colleagues in other collegial contexts.

### *2. How do these narratives relate to the metaphor of collegial contexts/clusters?*

Narratives often make reference to local circumstances. This result supports the view of the organisation formulated in the introduction, a view of socially formed and loosely coupled collegial contexts developing their own solutions to problems or interpretations of phenomena.

The narratives display only a weak or no reference at all to the overall organisation or other collegial contexts. Teaching practices emerging in the material appear to be talked about locally.

*R:* I think there's a lot of information exchanged, during coffee breaks. Might be typical Swedish, I don't know, but, eh... We didn't have these overall department meetings very often, but at coffee break, if you're not at coffee break for one week, you, you miss everything.

*I:* Really? And is...

*R:* You miss all this non official information, and, it's, I think it's important to get this information, to know what's going on, who has applied for, for that, money, and who's doing that. Because if you, if you don't get that information, you only have those official meetings eh... And it, yeah, it, for me it's, I, it's very important information, just to, to know what, what the other people are working with and what problems they have and...

*I: ---/*

*R:* We, we just discussed how it would affect our courses, and, how it would affect us. Of course this, eh...

*I:* You mean the official policy of [the faculty], or...?

*R:* No we'd... , I don't, we, we, we don't care so much about...

*I:* Yeah.

*R:*... any policy. (Respondent 11)

*I:* Do you have other colleagues who have tried this and did they tell you about their experiences?

*R:* Eh, yes. Eh, courses in, eh, for example in [a sub-discipline], and eh, there are some exchange students. They have had one, eh... The big lectures are in Swedish, but the textbook of course is in English, and material, eh, you can get in English, and, and... Eh, there are special groups where, where you talk English and so.

*I:* Mhm. Special groups mainly for the exchange students?

*R:* Yes, ah, yes. Eh, and other students as well. Yes, hmm.

*I:* So this is a specific colleague [sharing the same local context] of yours that you are thinking of?

*R:* Yes, yes. (Respondent 12)

All the respondents refer to their respective local context where colleagues interact on a daily basis. This is the arena where solutions to teaching problems or various ideas are negotiated and decided upon. In hierarchical terms, the faculty, sometimes even the department, is treated as something remote and abstract in relation to the local context. The loosely coupled character of the organisation where collegial contexts operate more or less independently from each other, is not only confirmed, but emerges as a significant feature. Furthermore, the idea of strong ties inside contexts illustrating frequent communication is also confirmed in the organisation studied.

*3. Do narratives, if they exist, travel beyond the borders of the local collegial contexts?*

*4. Are the narratives picked up and translated by members of other collegial contexts?*

Narratives do not travel in the organisation. Here is a typical answer to a probing question aimed at eliciting the extent to which narratives travel:

*I:* Did you hear from your colleagues in other departments?

*R:* Eh, no, no, no. Hmm.

*I:* You didn't hear about their situations that they've experienced?

*R:* No, no. (Respondent 12)

Only one single narrative (out of the 33) originated in a collegial context outside the interviewee's own. In this specific case, the narrative was picked up during a teaching and learning conference organised within the faculty.

- *R:* She [a specific and named teacher in another department] initiated a project where eh, they made things outside the course, so they had these gatherings, social events where they, eh baked cakes together, and things like that. So they... Hehe, so she would, would write a sign on the, on the coffee room door that eh

today at five o'clock this room is occupied, and then she took all the students there and then they baked cakes together and had discussions... That weren't really related to the course, but eh, it really, eh... She made a presentation at one of these conferences we have. I think that was in the university level conference, eh...

- *I*: Teaching and learning conference? That was one of those?
- *R*: Yeah.
- *I*: Yeah.
- *R*: Yeah, and the interesting thing is that it really helped eh, the students to take in the course, because these social events eh, broke through some of the barriers between the students since they're from many different cultures and different language skills and different mother tongue and everything. And, so they became, started to get to know each other a bit, and that really helped them to, to focus on the subject. So, so, yea. (Respondent 3)

Thus, it is clear through the material that narratives about teaching and learning do not travel spontaneously in the organisation.

Even though narratives do not travel, rumours do. Several rumours surfaced often with a more or less explicit indication that no further information could be offered, even if asked for. Some of these rumours describe situations outside the local collegial context.

*R*: I have heard students complaining about that teachers here, that are not Swedish, of origin, eh, it might be teachers [from X country], might be teachers [from Y country] and so on, their English...

*I*: Yea.

*R*: ... in giving the lectures might be quite problematic for the students.

*I*: Oh, okay.

*R*: But this is only things that I've heard about, eh, and, well this is all I know about it, I, I... (Respondent 5)

*R*: At least here in this building the, the idea of teaching undergraduate students in English got a bad, sort of, word (Respondent 2)

In a conversation with one of the respondents (5) after the interview he revealed that he deliberately had chosen to exclude names and to include markers indicating that no additional information would be given even if asked for. He transformed the narrative into a rumour because he wanted to offer the information but without exposing the individuals involved.

It appears in this research that narratives are indeed formulated and told locally, but not outside the respective collegial context. The material suggests that if episodes are told to someone outside the local collegial context, they are reformulated into rumours, as illustrated above.

## Discussion

It is of course important to consider that interviews seldom capture authentic conversations. The interviewees are placed in a specific situation where they choose what to tell. The example of the teacher who reformulated his narrative into a rumour is a clear example of this. The interviewees edited their answers during the interviews. It means that the narratives surfacing cannot be claimed to represent the entire sum of experiences gained by teachers in the international classroom in the organisation at hand.

But it also means that just as the respondents chose what to tell the interviewer, they also choose what to tell colleagues.

Thirty-three narratives emerged in the material formulated in personal ways by individual teachers. It is thus clear that teachers do indeed formulate experiences from teaching into narratives (see also Roxå and Mårtensson, 2009). But it is also evident that the narratives do not travel in the organisation; they remain within the local collegial context. Rumours, however, do travel.

Rumours in the material highlight different formats for exchange of experiences. It is fair to assume that the rumours recounted in the interviews were, at least partly, meant to convey important information. In that sense, rumours potentially can support organisational learning. The problem with rumours, however, is that the quality of the format is poor as a carrier of experiences. If experiences acquired by teachers in higher education are to spread among colleagues and provide a source for organisational learning, there is a need for a more effective format to carry them. Rumours can hardly fulfil such a purpose, as they are not open for further inquiry. They cannot be verified since the main character(s) in the rumour cannot be approached. They are drained from such information as names, or aspects of the contexts are excluded (as in the example offered by interviewee 5). Rumours simply are of low value for organisational learning.

The material contradicts the idea that academic teaching is private, instead teaching emerges as a locally and collegially formed practice. The interviewees describe and illustrate local conversations where experiences are told and discussed. This takes place inside local collegial contexts but not across their boundaries. Narratives appear to be discussed and potentially incorporated into the day-to-day practices of local workgroups and teams. They become a local storage for knowledge and can potentially support local learning. But as they do not move beyond the boundaries of the collegial contexts, they do not support learning in other parts of the organisation. The observations made here support the visualised image of the organisation as comprised of many loosely coupled collegial contexts with strong internal ties but with a few weak ties linking them to other collegial contexts.

The problem, as illustrated here, is that the existing narratives do not travel in the organisation. Theoretically this should happen through the weak ties linking collegial contexts to each other. It does not happen. The question is why?

A possible explanation could be that weak ties do not exist. But since rumours appear to travel between local contexts the idea of weak ties with a capacity to carry information is at least supported. The question then becomes even more interesting: If narratives as well as weak ties exist in the organisation researched, why then do the narratives not travel?

Since the narratives exist and since they are communicated inside the collegial contexts, the conclusion argued for here is that they do not travel outside the collegial contexts because of a perception that they are not asked for.

It is revealing to compare this to how collegial clusters function in research contexts. There, members *have to* gather and sum up experiences acquired elsewhere in order to become full-fledged members of the research contexts. New members often have to provide an overview of relevant research before they are able or even allowed to engage, and they have to do so publicly. In research it is the individual member who seeks out relevant experiences gained elsewhere. It is also clear for those involved why this happens and how it should be done. This might be an important explanation for why research is an excellent example of how experiences gained travel efficiently even across institutional boundaries. The individual researcher has to actively seek out experiences gained elsewhere.

This is not yet the case in relation to teaching, at least not in the organisational context studied here. Consequently, even though many examples of funding programmes for innovations in teaching are accompanied by imperatives to disseminate experiences gained, this will not support organisational learning as long as the potential receivers do not actively engage. Attention therefore has to be placed on colleagues' interest in and ability to receive and even seek out experiences in teaching, even though these experiences originate in other collegial contexts. In research norms already exists that influence members to ask for experiences gained by others; similar norms do not exist in relation to teaching.

It means that if we want the entire institution to be able to dynamically learn from experiences already present in some of its collegial contexts, considerably more work has to



be done to create more opportunities for significant knowledge exchange between members of different collegial contexts. If we want experiences from teaching gained by teachers to become an integral part of organisational learning in higher education, we should create incentives for teachers to seek out the experiences of others. Based on the results reported here, it is concluded that experiences from teaching are told to those who show they are interested, that is, colleagues inside the local collegial context. Only by raising the interest for teachers' experiences will they cross the borders of the local collegial contexts.

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# Paper IV



## Significant conversations and significant networks – exploring the backstage of the teaching arena

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This article presents an inquiry into conversations that academic teachers have about teaching. The authors investigated to whom they talk and the forms that these conversations take. The findings indicate that most teachers rely on a small number of significant others for conversations that are characterised by their privacy, by mutual trust and by their intellectual intrigue. Individual teachers seem to have small ‘significant networks’, where private discussions provide a basis for conceptual development and learning, quite different from the ‘front stage’ of formal, public debate about teaching. Individual teachers seem to have more significant conversations and larger networks where the local culture is perceived to be supportive of such conversations. The findings are interpreted in relation to socio-cultural theories, and have clear implications for the development of teaching.

### Introduction

There is evidence in the literature that academic teachers are better teachers if they pay close attention to their students’ learning, and reflect about and design teaching with the students’ learning in focus, rather than if they put the teaching activity first (Prosser and Trigwell 1999; Martin et al. 2000; Ho, Watkins, and Kelly 2001; Entwistle and Peterson 2004). There is also an established link between teachers’ conceptions about teaching and learning, and the quality outcome of student learning. These conceptions range from teachers who are mainly concerned with how to display disciplinary content to students as effectively as possible (*‘teacher-focused teaching’*), to teachers who focus on how to effectively support students’ ability to master the discipline at hand (*‘student-focused or learning-focused teaching’*) (Barr and Tagg 1995; Ramsden 2005).

These accounts, and their links to the quality of student learning, are not without challenges (Malcolm and Zukas 2001; Lindsay 2004). But, for the purpose of this article, it is enough to acknowledge that a variation exists in how academic teachers understand teaching and learning, and that this understanding is in some way linked to how they plan, perform, and interpret their professional practice, which is to support student learning. The focus of this article is to discuss what influences a teacher to move from one understanding to another. In doing so we use a socio-cultural perspective, focusing in particular on the conversations teachers have with colleagues. The assumption is that during some of these conversations teachers allow themselves to be

influenced to such an extent that they develop, or even sometimes drastically change, their personal understanding of teaching and learning.

That a person's individual interpretation of a situation influences his or her actions means that individuals are knowledgeable in their relationship to the world. Humans live their lives 'as reflexive beings cognitively appropriating time rather than merely "living" it' (Giddens 2004, 237). This implies an active and deliberate way of living that should be true also for university teachers. They construct their understanding of teaching, and they teach in ways they believe in. This does not mean that they are all excellent teachers, but it means that most of the time they believe in what they do, or at least they try to make the best of it. On the other hand, teaching does not happen in a vacuum; it takes place in the context of, among other things, a discipline and a departmental (or other organisational entity) culture. Trowler and Cooper (2002) and Trowler (2005) explore how teachers are influenced by disciplinary traditions and other cultural structures constructed over time, i.e. 'teaching and learning regimes' (Trowler and Cooper 2002). These traditions, or, in Trowler's terms, 'moments', include recurrent practices, tacit assumptions, conventions of appropriateness, subjectivities in interaction and power relations. This cultural influence has also been identified in a joint study in Finland and the UK, where it is documented as 'systematic variation in both student- and teacher-focused dimensions of approaches to teaching across disciplines and across teaching contexts ... In other words, teachers who experience different contexts may adopt different approaches to teaching in those different contexts' (Lindblom-Ylänne et al. 2006, 285, 294). Therefore, even if teachers are knowledgeable agents, they are also placed in a dialectical relation with the surrounding world.

This surrounding context can be material in nature – for instance, a physical environment – but it can also be social in nature, as in the interactions between individuals working together within a particular department. In this article we use a socio-cultural perspective to focus on the social context of university teachers. To pursue this line of inquiry we move even closer to the social life of university teachers, recognising that university teaching is individually constructed as well as socially influenced. On the one hand, the individual's thinking is highly important, and teaching is a skill dependent on the individual's capacity. On the other hand, the teaching role is also one where the social context governs some of the available scope for action. In the classic book, *Academic tribes and territories* (Becher and Trowler 2001), the authors, in order to understand academic life, consider both the discipline (the territory) and the social life of those inhabiting the discipline (the tribe). Our attempt with this article is to make a contribution to our understanding of the latter.

### **Learning about teaching**

The perspective on teachers' learning used here stems from phenomenographic research. Learning is seen as a development of the individual's relation to the world (Marton and Booth 1997). The learner interacts with the world by focusing on a limited number of aspects. The individual uses these limited numbers of aspects in order to construct, or activate, a conception of the specific situation. A few aspects perceived by a teacher are enough to recognise a teaching situation. The teacher will base his or her decisions on this conception, rather than on all aspects available. Consequently, learning can be viewed as the activation of processes when further aspects are incorporated into a comprehensive conception, or where new aspects force an old conception to change.

Conceptions are not fixed formations (Marton and Booth 1997), nor do they determine any specific sort of practice. Conceptions interact with the context (Demastes, Good, and Peebles 1995), and therefore they do not necessarily result in excellent skills or teaching performances. But the focus on conceptions offers a useful perspective while trying to understand how teachers learn about teaching, and, as mentioned before, there are empirical studies which claim that teachers' conceptions about teaching and learning relate to the quality of student learning (Kember 1997; Prosser and Trigwell 1999; Ho, Watkins, and Kelly 2001).

Since conceptual development and change results in a different perception of the world, it also affects the perception of the individual's own identity (Marton, Dall'Alba, and Beaty 1993), and his or her perception of others in the social context. In short, this means that if a university teacher learns something of importance about teaching and learning, he or she, via an incorporation of new aspects into his or her previous knowledge, develops his or her view not only on teaching in general but also on his or her role as a teacher. For a fuller account of this process see Entwistle and Walker (2000).

We will explore the social interactions between academic teachers which, from a socio-cultural perspective, influence their understanding of teaching and learning. In doing so, we have to understand more about academic communication.

### **Academic communication**

Many writers, including ourselves, have described university teaching as a solitary business (Ramsden 1998; Handal 1999; Roxå and Mårtensson 2004; Gizir and Simsek 2005). Becher and Trowler (2001) describe the seemingly contradictory nature of communication in academia. Communication is the driving force for development, often in the form of peer-review. Simultaneously, academics seem strangely reluctant to engage in discussion and debate: 'The inclination to play safe – to minimize the risk of making professional enemies by opposing or being critical of colleagues' views – is also reflected in the preference, noted earlier, of many academics to steer clear of direct competition with others' (127).

But there are more nuances to academic communication. Becher and Trowler (2001, 92) also describe how academic researchers tend to rely on two networks: one is large, containing sometimes several hundreds of individuals, used for referencing and orientation. Here researchers decide what to do and how to position themselves and their research. The other network, as small as up to 10 individuals, is used for the testing of ideas and feedback on draft papers, involving more personal matters than orientation and referencing. Here researchers develop and nurture new ideas and new thoughts until these are mature enough to be presented to the larger network.

Following from that, it seems interesting to explore what social processes are significant for the way teachers construct and maintain an understanding about teaching and learning. We have, therefore, investigated the conversational partners that university teachers have, and the nature of these conversations. The intention is to identify smaller networks in relation to teaching within a larger social context. If such networks exist, teachers should be able to report on how they differentiate between colleagues while talking about teaching. We hypothesise that teachers are able to name rather few colleagues with whom they have sincere discussions about teaching, and that they express themselves differently while talking to colleagues not included among those few. If this is the case, it would be reasonable to assume that conversations in small

networks have greater implications for how teachers construct, maintain and develop an understanding of teaching and learning, than would be the case for conversations going on in large networks.

### The investigation

This investigation started off from informal discussions with teachers and colleagues, and from buzz-group exercises during presentations at conferences. These discussions were concerned with whom academics talk to seriously about teaching. The anecdotal accounts we gathered from these discussions supported our hypothesis – university teachers have a few people with whom they have sincere conversations about teaching and learning (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Encouraged by this primary confirmation of our hypothesis, we started collecting evidence in a more systematic way. On five occasions data was collected concerning the number of conversational partners, where these were found, and the character of the conversations. Later we also included a question concerning the local culture in which these conversations took place.

A questionnaire was distributed to, in total, 109 academic teachers, of whom 106 answered the questions. The questionnaire was distributed on different occasions: during a national teaching and learning conference (40 answers) and at the beginning of pedagogical courses (66). The pedagogical courses were either mandatory (49 respondents) or voluntary (17 respondents). The data collected at the national conference was not categorised with regard to discipline. The data collected from the pedagogical courses was from engineering studies (17), the social sciences (17) and the humanities (32). The questions were presented in a questionnaire where the respondents indicated graphically how many conversational partners they had, as well as the location of them.

As part of the instructions for answering the questionnaire, we introduced the respondents to the concept of *critical friends* (Handal 1999), as a way to focus the respondents on individuals with whom they had sincere and serious discussions about teaching and learning.

The questions posed to all 109 respondents were:

- With how many people do you have engaging conversations about teaching and learning?
- Where are these conversational partners found?
- What characterises your conversations? (Please describe them.)

In our later data collection we added the following question:

- Do you consider your local professional culture to be supportive or non-supportive of such conversations about teaching and learning?

### Results

#### *With how many people do you have engaging conversations about teaching and learning?*

In total 106 teachers answered the question, clearly showing that everybody could relate to our instructions. As clearly, they indicated that they had a limited number of conversational partners with whom they had serious discussions about teaching. Some 83% of the respondents had up to 10 conversational partners (Figure 1). The result mirrors

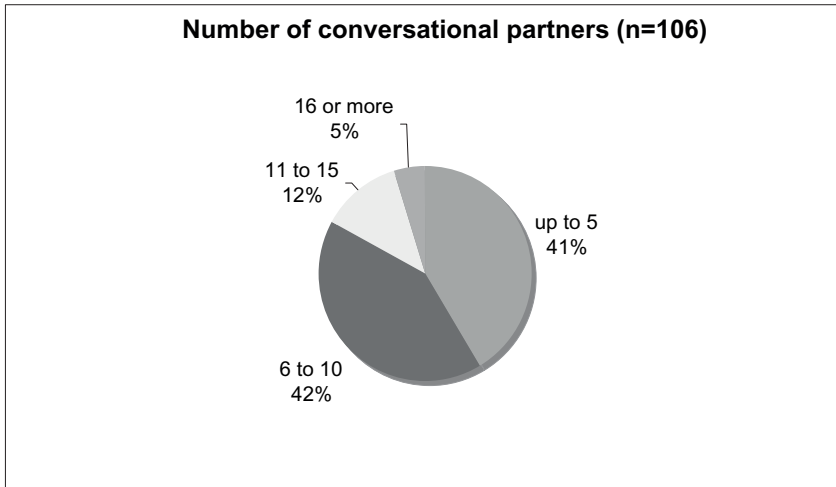


Figure 1. The number of people with whom university teachers have sincere discussions about teaching and learning.

what Becher and Trowler (2001) describe in relation to communication patterns among researchers.

There are differences between disciplines within the sample, even though the number of respondents is relatively small. Engineering studies reported an average of 5.4 conversational partners, the social sciences 8.4, and the humanities 8.2.

That teachers in engineering report fewer partners than in social sciences and the humanities again mirrors Becher and Trowler's (2001) accounts of research. These accounts are explained as a result of the level of competition, which they claim is higher in the hard sciences than in the soft sciences such as the humanities. It may be that this is true also for teaching. Even though we see in our data that teachers in engineering have fewer conversational partners, there is no clear evidence supporting Becher and Trowler's explanation in our sample. This issue would require further inquiry.

#### ***Where are these conversational partners found?***

In our initial data collection, at the national teaching and learning conference, the 40 academics stated that their conversational partners could be found anywhere: within their discipline, in other universities or outside academia. In our later data collection, the teachers were asked to specify the number of conversational partners found within their own discipline, within their department, within their institution or elsewhere. This might have implications for the type of discussions occurring. If the discussions are between colleagues from the same discipline, disciplinary considerations can be made, while if the partners do not share discipline or even institution the conversational content is probably affected. The results are shown in Table 1.

It is noteworthy that university teachers discuss teaching with colleagues within their own discipline. In our sample, only three teachers indicated that they did not



Table 1. How many people university teachers have sincere discussions about teaching and learning with by discipline.

	Where are the conversational partners found? (average number of partners)				<i>n</i>
	Within discipline	Department	Institution	Elsewhere	
Engineering	1.9	2	0.6	0.8	17
Social sciences	2.5	2.7	1.2	1.3	17
Humanities	3.6	1.5	1.2	2	32

have a single disciplinary colleague to discuss teaching with. A further question concerns the teachers' use of the same partners for discussions about both teaching and research. This is a question we have not explicitly asked, and an issue that also needs further inquiry.

### ***What characterises your conversations?***

We asked the teachers to visualise their conversations and write accounts about them, either as stories about particular conversations or as more general comments about them. The accounts revealed a multitude of types of situations and topics. Some commonalities will be elaborated and illustrated.

#### *Private conversations*

Over and over again the accounts emphasised the private nature of these conversations. They almost always occur in a sheltered place, and almost never in formal meetings. In their accounts, teachers emphasised that these conversations are not overheard by anyone uninvited. These accounts are translated from Swedish:

We were sitting in X's office behind a closed door. It was not locked, but we knew that no one would dare to open it ... We were upset because our colleague A did not think it was necessary for the students [in engineering] to calculate nutrition. (Engineering studies)

I had one such conversation today, with A in the car, on the highway. About the criteria for assessment formulated by this other department and a text produced by the students. Basically it was about how our department seems to be moving in another direction. Suddenly there was a traffic jam and the conversation shifted. (Humanities)

These conversations are never planned but occur spontaneously with different intervals in the small group (3 individuals), who often have lunch together ... There it is possible to discuss ideas, thoughts and opinions that are not directly *comme-il-faut*. (Engineering studies)

#### *Trustful conversations*

The next common theme is the degree of trust that the teachers have in these conversations and in their conversational partners. The conversations sometimes contradict the official agenda, and they are also very personal. The quotes below illustrate that the conversations are permeated by trust:

An important foundation is respect, that we have full respect for each other as persons and for each other's opinions. (Humanities)

The foundations of conversations are often problems, obstacles and challenges rising from the teaching practice; that is, 'real' difficulties. Reaching out for external support to help with 'your' teaching problems, seeking suggestions for possible solutions. (Humanities)

Student evaluations in our department show that some teachers intimidate some students. Have discussed this with my closest colleagues in order to understand what is going on. It has led me into reflections about my own behaviour towards students. (Engineering studies)

### *Intellectually intriguing conversations*

These conversations are not just small talk or a way to give and receive emotional support. They deal with important disciplinary content, and challenges about how to support students' understanding:

The conversation took place on the bus, on the way back from work. It is often about concepts or procedures and how to explain these. Mostly these things start with a story about something that occurred during today's lecture or seminar. (Engineering studies)

We talk after my teaching. We meet, or bump into each other by the copying machine. Someone wants to tell something, or complain, or compare – What do you think? Do you have any ideas about how to explain ... Have you experienced the same? How did you solve it? (Humanities)

She came to my department, and she talked about certain things in ways that helped me to understand things I had been working on for a long time. But never really understood. I started to use her illustrations in my teaching, modified them gradually. These conversations happen at random. They can start with research and end with teaching, or vice versa. (Engineering studies)

One teacher from the humanities summarises all these themes in one single account:

The conversations with my significant others concerning pedagogical questions/teaching and learning are characterised by the fact that they are informal, originate in different situations and different contexts where the topic of discussion initially might have been another, and, consequently, they are spontaneous. The conversations can nevertheless be quite long (sometimes), around 25–30 minutes. An important foundation is respect, that we have full respect for each other as persons and for each other's opinions. Another important condition is reciprocity, i.e. a mutual exchange of ideas and experiences. These conversations have quite a different nature from the formal meetings with other teachers that are arranged by people responsible for study programmes. These formal meetings/conversations have more a character of diplomatic conferences, where each word is carefully chosen, the truth is not always at the forefront (truth is another characteristic of the conversations with the significant others that I just forgot) and one must bite one's lip (sometimes).

### *Significant conversations in relation to the perceived local context*

This question – do you consider your local professional culture to be supportive or non-supportive of such conversations about teaching and learning? – was posed later in our investigations to 50 of our respondents, as we gradually became interested in

Table 2. Respondents' perception of cultural support, and their reported number of conversational partners, in total and within their own discipline.

Culture perceived as supportive or non-supportive to discussions about teaching and learning.	Supportive	Non-supportive
Number of respondents indicating supportive or non-supportive culture	31	16
Total number of conversational partners	231	56
Number of conversational partners per respondent (mean)	7.4	3.5
Number of conversational partners within discipline	121	33
Number of conversational partners within discipline, per respondent (mean)	3.9	2.1

possible relations between the conversational partners and the local culture as perceived by the teacher. The teachers were asked to indicate their perception of the local culture by marking a cross on a line representing a continuum ranging from 'supportive' to 'non-supportive'. We received 47 answers.

There seems to be a clear link between how encouraging the culture is experienced as and how many conversational partners the respondents have (see Table 2). If the culture is experienced as supportive of such conversations, the teachers report twice as many conversational partners than if the culture is experienced as non-supportive. This is the case for the total number of partners as well as for the number of partners within the same discipline.

## Discussion

This inquiry focuses on how university teachers create and maintain their understanding of teaching and learning. The perspective is mainly socio-cultural. So far our findings clearly indicate that teachers have sincere conversations about teaching with a few specific colleagues. The data also indicates that some features of these conversations are critical: they are permeated by trust, they have an intellectual component of problem solving or idea testing, and they are private and involve only a few distinct individuals. In relation to conversations in the larger social context, there are indications in our data that those conversations are less sincere and less personal.

There are, of course, a number of themes worth exploring in relation to the issues addressed in this article. However, in our material three themes emerged as characteristics of the conversations – trust, privacy and intellectual intrigue.

### *Trust*

It is important to emphasise the component of mutual trust in the accounts of conversations that we have collected. The people who have these discussions are sometimes close colleagues with a long history together, and often with similar interests and values. They regularly return to their trust for the other person's judgement and state that they can often foresee the other person's reaction. The range of topics also indicates that the conversations deal with intellectual as well as emotional material, with ideas and problems, and with issues that sometimes are in contradiction with the official agenda.

Deci et al. (2006) have investigated the effects of receiving, and giving, what they call 'autonomy support' in friendship relations: 'Autonomy support is defined in terms of one relational partner acknowledging the other's perspective, providing choice, encouraging self-initiation, and being responsive to the other' (313). They show that, in such a constellation, both parties experience increased well-being and overall satisfaction. They also show that such a relationship, over time, leads to a capacity to view things through the other person's perspective.

It is likely that these conversations open up the possibility of constructing and maintaining – and perhaps partly changing – an understanding about the realities of teaching. They offer the possibility for autonomy support, and they also create a situation where it is possible to see the world through the other person's perspective, at least to a certain degree where aspects of reality hidden to one individual become accessible by a mutual exchange of perspectives. We claim that such relations qualify as what Berger and Luckmann (1966) call a relation with a *significant other*. Significant others, they state, 'occupy a central position in the economy of reality-maintenance. They are particularly important for the ongoing confirmation of that crucial element of reality we call identity' (170). Following from this, these conversations are likely to influence teachers' conceptions of teaching.

We use the term *significant conversations* for the discussions university teachers have provided us with accounts of. The significant conversations arguably hold an exclusive position in the socio-cultural context, where university teachers continuously construct, maintain and develop an understanding about teaching and learning. These significant conversations also, we assume, have implications for the individual's identity. The individual may expand his or her identity into something which offers new possibilities, both in his or her teaching practice but, possibly, also in more official disciplinary and departmental discourse. Yet another implication is that, considering the personal nature of the significant conversations and their sometimes very long history, the resulting understanding of reality may, in some cases, take forms that official discourse may find both strange and alien.

### **Privacy**

These significant conversations take place in private, meaning that the individuals involved are well aware of whom they want to talk with, and that the conversations take place where they cannot be overheard. The privacy and the teachers' descriptions of the conversations relate to what Goffman (2000) calls *backstage* behaviour. Backstage behaviour refers to situations where we are private, or at least feel that we know who is watching, and we behave in a more unrestricted way than when we are 'front stage'. When we are observed by others, especially when we are not sure about their interpretation of our actions, we behave more according to what we consider to be the appropriate code.

However, even though these significant conversations take place backstage, they are not isolated from the surrounding culture. The participants carry with them discursive material from the outside, they react and relate to things going on outside, they are presumably aware of a whole range of things while having the conversations, but it is the atmosphere of privacy and trust that allows them to open up in a way that makes learning possible. Overall, these significant conversations that take place backstage are all part of a greater culture that flows through them. They are dependent on that culture, but they are also free to interpret its elements, and they do. This interplay

between different levels of culture is examined in more depth by Alvesson (2002), Trowler and Cooper (2002) and Giddens (2004).

### *Intellectual intrigue*

Many of the accounts in our data reveal conversations where the individuals try to make sense of experiences, where they deal with problems, and plan and evaluate actions. In many ways, what they do is to use their agency in the way explored theoretically by Giddens (2004). They use whatever knowledge they have to interpret experiences, and they use these interpretations while planning and conducting teaching.

But, similar to what Giddens points out, the teachers only have a limited view of the situation. There are numerous unintended consequences of what they decide to do. There are also an endless number of aspects they fail to recognise during interpretations. But it is still a way to understand a practice that they are engaged in. While doing so they use significant conversations with a few other colleagues for support.

Although the overall purpose of these significant conversations is to interpret teaching and learning realities, an external observer might be critically concerned with the quality of the reflections discernible in the accounts. According to the scholarship of teaching and learning literature (Boyer 1990; Hutchings and Shulman 1999; Trigwell et al. 2000; Kreber 2002), inquiry into teaching and learning for developmental purposes should make use of pedagogic literature and theory in order to deepen the individual's understanding, and the result of the inquiry should be made public for others to learn from and/or to criticise. Even though traces of this can be discerned in the accounts, they are not common or well developed. Rather, what can be seen are 'personal theories'. This should not be used as a reason to criticise the teachers. Instead it has to be recognised that teachers act in a cultural and historical context, where demands on scholarly approaches to teaching and learning vary considerably.

### **Conclusion**

The data presented here suggest that university teachers rely on a limited number of individuals to test ideas or solve problems related to teaching and learning. We conclude that teachers relate to a small network in the same way that researchers do, as described by Becher and Trowler (2001).

Because of the character of the conversations in these small networks, we call them *significant networks*. There are no signs of boundaries surrounding them, neither organisational nor physical. The networks rather appear as a number of exclusive relations where every individual has his or her significant relations, as illustrated in Figure 2. Each star indicates a teacher. The stars 1, 2 and 3 are individual teachers. Teachers 1 and 2 have significant conversations with each other, while 3 has them with 2 only as mediated by conversations through an additional teacher. The thick arrows bind together significant conversational partners, and the thin arrows indicate other individuals, less significant. The square indicates a department or working unit. Together, all of the arrows illustrate the web of relations that can be found inside and outside a department. Consequently, it is apparent, and supported by our data, that the significant networks do not acknowledge organisational boundaries such as departments. ×

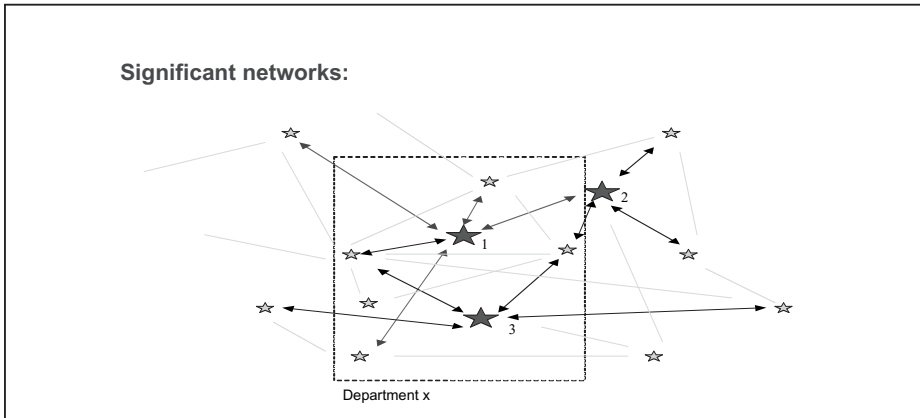


Figure 2. An illustration of a significant network for three teachers.

The existence of significant networks has implications for leadership and management as well as for academic development. By recognising significant networks it becomes possible to further understand why policies, organisational strategies or bureaucratic requirements have such a limited impact on university teaching (Trowler 1998; Bauer et al. 1999; Newton 2003; Hedin 2004; Stensaker 2006). The messages displayed in policies are interpreted and evaluated during many significant conversations, more or less independently of each other. The outcome of these conversations will determine the impact of each policy. If the outcome is unfavourable a policy would most likely fail in its attempt to influence practice. The significant networks and conversations are arguably quite resilient to external pressure, though the validity of this claim remains to be tested, since we have not asked specifically for accounts in relation to policies.

Another topic for further inquiry is the relation between significant networks and the wider social culture, departmental and institutional, appropriately exemplified by the concept of teaching and learning regimes (Trowler and Cooper 2002; Trowler 2005). We have attempted to explore that relation elsewhere (Roxå and Mårtensson 2009).

A third area for further inquiry is to deepen our understanding of significant networks more generally. Since they, in many ways, appear to be gatekeepers for development and change, it would be interesting to firstly investigate the quality of the conversations in relation to academic standards. Secondly, one might investigate how conversations about teaching and learning could be influenced, for instance in order to fuse a culture permeated by scholarly attempts to improve teaching.

### Acknowledgements

We are most grateful to all who have participated in the studies reported here, and who have provided our data. Special thanks to Professor Graham Gibbs, Oxford University, for invaluable comments and intriguing questions on drafts of this article, and to Sara Håkansson, Lund University, for likewise invaluable comments and language corrections.

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# Paper V



## **How Effects from Teacher-training of Academic Teachers Propagate into the Meso Level and Beyond,** Torgny Roxå and Katarina Mårtensson<sup>1</sup>

**Published in** E. Simon and G. Pleschova (2012) *Teacher Development in Higher Education. Existing Programs, Program Impact, and Future Trend*. London, Routledge.

### **Introduction**

Teacher-training<sup>2</sup> has a positive effect on academic teachers' way of thinking about their practice and on the teaching practice itself. A number of studies establish a link between teacher-training and the development, among participants, of a learning-focused conception of teaching, in contrast to a teaching or content-focused conception (Prosser and Trigwell 1999). This link extends to students' approaches to learning (Ho, Watkins, and Kelly 2001; Gibbs and Coffey 2004; Ramsden 2005; Prosser et al. 2006; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, and Nevgi 2007; Donnelly 2008; Ginns, Kitay, and Prosser 2010).

Other researchers (Giertz 1996) have interviewed departmental leaders and confirmed that these academic categories also acknowledge positive and visible effects from teacher-training among teachers. Similar visible changes in teaching practices have been self-reported by teachers (Stes, Clement, and Van Petegem 2007). A Swedish study surveyed 1,100 participants from six different higher education institutions regarding their experiences of a newly established national compulsory teacher-training programme. Again, the positive value of teacher-training was confirmed by the participants themselves (Gran 2006). If policymakers and practitioners wish to enhance academic teaching and student learning, it is clearly a good idea to organise teacher-training for academic teachers.

But there are issues to discuss. Participants report that what they have learnt during the training is often not valued within the local context (Gibbs and Coffey 2004; Gran 2006; Prosser et al. 2006; Stes, Clement, and Van Petegem 2007; Ginns, Kitay, and Prosser 2010). Such reports indicate that the causal link between training and development of teaching is not straightforward. Individual teachers benefit from training but might experience difficulties in their local context<sup>3</sup> in response to new ideas developed during training. These difficulties can manifest themselves as a lack of support and interest from colleagues or supervisors or as conservative attitudes on behalf of the students (Ginns, Kitay, and Prosser 2010). The main focus of this text is to explore this dissonance. So, training has documented positive effects on individuals, but these effects do not propagate naturally into the local context and beyond.

Related questions frequently discussed in relevant studies are whether training should be generic across disciplines or if it should be organised within the disciplines (Healey and Jenkins 2003; Trowler and Bamber 2005); if the departments should be the locus for training (Knight and Trowler 2000); or if training should be located within the everyday workgroup (Knight 2006a, 2006b). A recurrent argument maintains that it is within the discipline (or the department) that a teacher's professional identity is formed (Henkel 2005). Accordingly, this is where training and other kinds of professional development should take place. Taking individuals from their professional context, training them, and then expecting them to influence their peers once they

return is hardly likely to happen, especially if the teachers trained are younger colleagues within a professional community.

Moreover, there is the matter of time. Stes, Clement, and Van Petegem (2007) and Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne (2008) have documented effects related to time. The training has to have certain duration in time and the effects might not show until a period of daily practice has passed, which indicates that issues like professional identity and the acquisition of teaching skills relevant for new insights made during training need to develop over time. This very issue has also been discussed by Entwistle and Walker (2000).

Another theme concerns what objectives such training should have. One widespread objective is to support improved student learning, as measured, for instance, by students' approaches to learning, where a deep approach to learning (Marton and Booth 1997) among students is linked to teachers' conceptions of teaching (Prosser and Trigwell 1999). This outcome is well researched and supported (see above): training has positive effects on individual academic teachers' conceptions and subsequently on their students' learning. Other objectives, however, might also come into play, like the support of institutional goals as expressed in institutional policies (Clegg 2009; Macdonald 2009); how to contribute to the institution as a learning organisation (Senge 2006); how to support teachers as reflective practitioners (Schön 1983); or how to support an emerging academic culture based on the scholarship of teaching and learning (Lindberg-Sand and Sonesson 2008).

The aims and objectives of teacher-training are in fact numerous and sometimes also contradictory, turning the field of teacher-training into an institutional political arena where different managerial interests intervene and rearrange things (Harland and Staniforth 2008) often according to poorly considered ideologies (Trowler and Bamber 2005). Such contradictory aims and objectives, where the training of teachers appears to be the solution to many problems, such as the implementation of information and communication technology, widening participation, sustainable development, et cetera, highlight the fact that systemic effects from teacher-training in higher education is an area which is clearly underresearched.

### **Systemic Effects from Training**

Below we suggest a perspective where the effects or lack of effects from teacher-training can be understood. We will focus on the issue of effects spreading from the individual into the local context—the meso level—and beyond. The purpose is to compose a systemic perspective and thereby contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of what a higher education institution can expect from organising training for its teachers, and perhaps what individual academics might expect from higher education contexts where such training is introduced.

We will discuss teacher-training in relation to the system in which it happens: the workgroup, the department, faculty/school, and the institution. Are there effects from teacher-training on these levels? How can we understand the system so that effects cannot only be measured but also explained and promoted further? This attempt relates to results presented by Ginns, Kitay, and Prosser (2010, 245), who, in a study about effects reported by participants in a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education programme, conclude: "Thus lack of support from academic managers and peers were identified as significant limiting factors in pursuing scholarly activities in teaching and learning."

Any attempt to detect effects from an intervention, like training of academic teachers, must include a perspective of what we are looking for, the intended outcomes of the training, and a clear view of the system in which we look. We would not know what to search for if we were

unclear about the former, and we would not know where and when to search if we were unclear about the latter. Our emphasis will be on where to look for effects and how they propagate in the local context. Central to this perspective are the concepts of micro level, meso level, and macro level (Bauer et al. 1999; Hannah and Lester 2009).

Furthermore, the perspective used is a cultural one (Alvesson 2002; Trowler 2008; Ancona et al. 2009) where the kind of effects we are looking for are related to changes in how teaching and learning are understood as indicated during interaction among teachers while they try to make sense of the teaching and learning context in which they are active: choice of words during conversations, various actions related to teaching and student learning, the frequency of conversations, content in and the complexity of these conversations about teaching, the use of theory and the ambitions revealed during these conversations, how teacher-training is perceived, and so on. If these things change and can be related to teacher-training, they would constitute cultural effects. It is assumed that if teachers talk differently about teaching, think differently, and change their beliefs about teaching, the teaching practice will also change, and so will managers' opportunities to influence the system.

Culture, as it is used in this text, is not something an organisation has, but rather what it is. It refers to ways of doing, talking, and thinking about things, about patterns that make a group visible against the backdrop of other groups (Alvesson 2002). The habits and traditions of a group created during interaction over time gain structural property and thereby begin to influence individuals and their actions. These traditions and norms become something newcomers have to learn, either by participation or during formal induction processes. Newcomers also perceive the traditions more easily than older members of a culture, who tend to be blind to them. The relationships between individual agency and the structural properties of norms and traditions should be interpreted in line with Giddens's (2004) perspective on structuration, meaning that the individuals are influenced by the culture as they enact it. They can, as knowledgeable agents, of course, choose to deviate from what is normal and culturally expected from them and thereby influence the culture and perhaps even change it, and sometimes they do. But since this entails putting professional identity and individual status at stake, the individuals within a culture on the whole act according to norms and traditions rather than against them.

With a focus on culture we follow several recent studies which emphasise culture as the most important factor in processes of change and development in higher education (Kuh 1993; Bauer et al. 1999; Kezar 2007; Harvey and Stensaker 2008; Edvardsson-Stiwne 2009; Merton et al. 2009). This significance of culture is further emphasised by Stensaker (2006, 47), who summarises a study of change in Norwegian higher education: "Hence, in this organisation authority concerning the quality of teaching and learning would not follow the hierarchical but rather the informal structure, and through mechanisms such as socialisation and training."

Overall we use a perspective on organisational studies proposed by Ancona et al. (2009) in which they distinguish three lenses for the study of an organisation. The cultural lens has already been described. A second lens, the organisation as it is strategically designed, reveals how the organisation is consciously constructed and thereby intended to function: Who is reporting to whom and when? How can the flow of information be secured so that the managers can act strategically? What does the budget flow look like? How can resources be allocated so that long-term objectives are met? The aim is to construct an organisation that is aligned and pursues the organisational objectives as efficiently as possible (Ancona et al. 2009). However, in the literature that evaluates change initiatives in higher education, the designed (or line) organisation (rector/vice chancellor—dean—head of the department/chair) often fails to reach

the intended outcomes (Bauer et al. 1999; Newton 2003; Hedin 2004; Osseo-Asare, Longbottom, and Murphy 2005).

The third lens presented by Ancona and associates (2009), the political lens, discerns the organisation with its stakeholders building alliances and struggling for power. In this text, as we mainly use the cultural lens, the organisation as strategic design and as a political system will not be in the foreground. But, as Ancona et al. stress, the three lenses are all necessary for reaching a comprehensive understanding of the organisation. Therefore, the organisation as strategically designed will appear in the text primarily during the discussion about the macro level while the political lens will appear as an undercurrent, constantly present but not in focus.

### **The Meso Level**

Individual teachers constitute the micro level. As we have seen already, effects on this level have been detected and are well documented. Teacher-training no doubt has positive effects on individual teachers. The rest of this text will therefore discuss the meso level with the objective to clarify how effects from training propagate from the micro level; that is, where and how effects become visible beyond the individual teacher, or how we can understand the lack of effects in spite of sometimes large volumes of training. The last part of the text will discuss the macro level and in particular how effects, or the lack of effects, can be understood from the managers' point of view.

The meso level is sometimes referred to as the institution (Bauer et al. 1999), the department (Knight and Trowler 2000), the discipline (Kreber 2009), the workgroup (Trowler and Bamber 2005; Hannah and Lester 2009), or the significant networks (Roxå and Mårtensson 2009a, 2009b).

Because the meso level does not reveal itself naturally, it must be constructed analytically, and there are, as mentioned above, several candidates, of which we initially will consider the department and the discipline. The department is an organisational entity, which in, for instance, an older German academic tradition, based on the idea of the professorship, could equal the discipline. But this has changed over time. Nowadays, in many national contexts, several disciplines or subjects often constitute a department, turning it into more of a formal organisational unit within a faculty/school. Therefore we consider the department to be mainly a part of the formal and designed organisation (Ancona et al. 2009). Consequently, when using a cultural perspective, the department is considered to be of lesser interest as a locus for the meso level. As a part of the designed organisation, the department, as it has grown in complexity from equalling one discipline to an organisational host for several disciplines, has become questionable as a potent arena for change.

The discipline might be of greater significance since it has a more profound influence on the individual's professional identity than the department (Henkel 2005). After all, academics are socialised into their disciplines through a long period (undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate studies) during which they are dependent on the approval from more senior members of the disciplinary community. Such induction processes normally leave considerable imprints on the individuals' professional identity (Van Maanen and Schein 1979).

Furthermore, disciplines have, gradually, constructed certain "ways of thinking and practicing" (Hounsell and Anderson 2009) which undergraduate and postgraduate students learn and internalise through a process of academic apprenticeship. By the time some of them advance further into the discipline as academic teachers, these ways are firmly internalised. Through such

a perspective the disciplines come into view as culturally formed and sustained and therefore appear promising in our investigation.

Thus, if disciplines constitute the meso level, then effects of teacher-training should extend from the micro level and influence the ways of thinking and practicing signifying the disciplinary community. Since we are looking for systemic effects, this could be where we should look for them. But disciplines are not the stable constructions we sometimes think they are, nor do they have clear boundaries to other disciplines. New disciplines emerge and old disciplines expand into new areas. As expressed by Ronald Barnett: “[D]isciplines, insofar as they are taken up in the teaching situation, are always in-the-making. They are not fixed edifices, which the student simply has to surmount or knock against—or even fall from. They are rather fluid regions, with intermingling and conflicting currents” (Barnett 2009, xvi). This point of view displays disciplines as being in a constant flux, subjected to ongoing negotiation and contestation, a problematic elusiveness for anyone using them as a firmament for further scholarly exploitations.

Other scholars have criticised the essentialist perspective where each discipline has its specific way of teaching, or thinking of teaching (Trowler 2005, 2009). It has been convincingly argued that a discipline, as it presents itself, is dependent on social variation among the academics—“the tribe”—teaching it (Becher and Trowler 2001). Moreover, it has been shown that individual academics sometimes teach the same discipline differently while doing so in different collegial contexts (Lindblom-Ylänne et al. 2006). This becomes a problem for us when we look for the effects of teacher-training on the level beyond the micro level. Instead of appearing as a stable ground, governing teaching methods and perspectives, disciplines come forward as social arenas where the individuals in a given context govern just as many of the decisions made as does the discipline.

For our purposes, therefore, disciplines appear too complex and multifaceted; their in-the-making character, pointed out by Barnett, makes it hard to distinguish the effects of training from other natural fluctuations. Changes in ways of thinking and practicing (Hounsell and Anderson 2009) might be part of a natural variation as well as affected by training. In this text we suggest two other possibilities for the meso level; firstly the workgroup (Trowler 2008) and secondly the significant network (Roxå and Mårtensson 2009a). They are both explicitly related to higher education and supported by empirical data. In addition, they are discerned through a cultural perspective on higher education rather than from a perspective emphasising the designed organisation or epistemological essentialism.

Trowler (2008) suggests the workgroup as the meso level, claiming that this is where the work is done, and where development therefore starts. He further claims that a workgroup, being a group of individuals sharing a working context, can be described in cultural terms as a “teaching and learning regime” (TLR). TLR is the way in which the workgroup performs and talks about things in relation to teaching and learning. It includes assumptions about the students, about knowledge, the discipline, et cetera. It offers a workgroup its identity and distinguishes it from other groups. Often it can, during everyday conversations, be summarised with the words “This is how we do things around here” and thereby imply a notion of clear boundaries to other workgroups. But these boundaries should not be overstressed. A workgroup is hardly ever isolated; rather it is leaky in its relation to the surrounding world. Nor is it the result of a consensus. Trowler (2008) stresses the conflictual nature of TLRs. Power and contestation are always present, giving a workgroup an agentic relation to the world. The emphasis on power is of great importance for the perspective outlined below.



In the studies by Roxå and Mårtensson (2009a, 2009b), academic teachers were asked whom they genuinely discussed teaching and learning with. Answers revealed that all respondents had a few conversational partners with whom they had private, backstage (Goffman 2000), and trustful personal conversations about teaching and learning. Drawing from social psychology (Berger and Luckmann 1966), these partners, the significant others, constitute the individual teacher's significant network. Conversations within these networks are assumed to be of a greater importance for the individual than everyday talk with others. Therefore, the significant networks are the focal point where individual teachers construct and maintain their conceptions about teaching and learning. These conceptions may be played out in practice or remain hidden backstage for future use. Additionally, a significant network is not limited to working contexts or organisational boundaries, and the conversations within them can serve many purposes, for instance, to maintain or confirm a particular status quo or to explore and develop something related to teaching and learning. In contrast to the conflictual and power-loaded nature of the workgroups, the significant networks are characterised by trust, which render them more of a consensus nature.

It is timely here to clarify that both the workgroup and the significant network in this text are treated as ideal types. The description above is by nature oversimplified since both workgroups and significant networks in reality appear in many forms and variations and sometimes are more or less overlapping. If so, they would most likely show many characteristics of a community of practice (Wenger 1999), implying that the members of a workgroup also would be significant to each other.

However, if the effects of teacher-training would become visible at the workgroup level, they would most likely appear as changes in the practice performed by the group, in turn often, but not always, a result of new power relations within the groups. Changes are likely to come after a process of renegotiation within the group, a process that could run smoothly or with turmoil. Such a process would in many cases include displacements of professional identities, making it a delicate, unpredictable process.

With a focus on significant networks, the main effects would rather be on the conceptions of teaching, conceptions that are negotiated through backstage (Goffmann 2000) conversations with significant others. Thus, development could be measured through interviews or questionnaires to identify aspects of conceptual change. However, bearing in mind the backstage nature of much development, these changes might be invisible during daily practices. Effects can also become visible through small changes possible to enact in one's own teaching without colleagues' awareness. There could be several reasons for individuals to keep ideas hidden backstage instead of enacting them openly or for introducing new ways of teaching privately without collegial notice. An investigation into these reasons and a subsequent removal of barriers and structural obstacles could very well increase the visible effects of training, even though the training itself did not change.

Another matter of importance would be to determine the workgroups' or the networks' attitudes towards change versus stability. In the case of the significant networks, which are formed spontaneously, the individuals have in most cases freely chosen each other as significant others. Therefore these alliances are likely to have been formed through the influence of homophily, that is, "the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001, 416). In other words, McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001) investigate how people who are similar to each other also bond with each other, and dispute the alleged fact that all spontaneous social networks will

be based on some kind of consensus. Individuals prefer to interact with others who confirm rather than challenge their own beliefs, a fact initially supporting the assumption that significant networks are likely to be conservative and that they promote stability.

However, both status quo and exploration can very well be considered as states of stability: either there is no development at all, that is, the present state of affairs is confirmed over and over again, or there is a steady enterprise of continuous development rendering a situation where the lack of advancement would be considered awkward. From this follows that even though the significant networks are consensus formations they are not necessarily hostile to change and development. As the workgroups are maintained through power relations they can also be either conservative or involved in continuous change and development (Trowler 2008).

In both cases and in relation to the propagation of effects, it is of the greatest importance for evaluators to know whether or not the workgroups or networks have a developmental enterprise. If the status quo were paramount, the effects from individual teacher-training would most certainly be absorbed within the social context and fade away. If the groups or the networks, on the other hand, were characterised by enterprises of development, teacher-training would fuel further development and accelerate the process. Hence, the effects of training can both be determined by the training itself and also by the social context in which the individual teachers are active.

An example of the phenomenon discussed above can be found in Ginns, Kinsay, and Prosser (2010), where two academic teachers, Anne and Belinda, illustrate different outcomes of an Australian Graduate Certificate in Higher Education programme—one leading to further development and the other to hesitation. Not because Anne and Belinda viewed the training itself differently but because they worked in entirely different social contexts in relation to teaching and learning. One context (Anne) supported participation with encouragement from both colleagues and management, while in the other case (Belinda), colleagues and management discouraged participation. “As a result, Belinda felt that ‘it’s kind of a disincentive to do it again’.” (Ginns, Kinsay, and Prosser 2010, 240).

Prosser et al. (2006) report similar experiences, where again the outcome of teacher-training is perceived differently depending on the relation between the individual teacher and his or her collegial context (see also Gran 2006; Stes, Clement, Van Petegem 2007). According to these studies, many academic teachers participating in training complain about collegial responses once they return from training, which suggests that the problems are encountered during interaction at the meso level. We argue that these negative responses indicate the presence of workgroups and/or significant networks that are orientated towards stability rather than change and development. Gran (2006) reported contrasting and positive exceptions, where teachers from one specific faculty within one of six surveyed institutions describe that the training they are participating in is positively valued in their collegial context. Here, the participants are “well aware of the fact that their active participation in [the faculty’s] development strategy is highly valued” (Gran 2006, 9).

A conclusion to be made so far is that the first signs of propagation of effects from teacher-training would look different depending on which focus we use while studying the meso level. A simplified way to distinguish the two focuses would be: either we look for visible changes in teaching practices (focus on the workgroup), with possible measurable effects on student learning; or we look for changes in teachers’ ways of thinking and talking about teaching and learning (focus on the significant network), even though we might not necessarily see any visible effects within the teaching practice.

These effects appear after passing thresholds of different kinds. In a workgroup, change occurs through the negotiation with others, often involving power issues and/or impacts on professional identity, while in a network the stakes are much lower. Here teachers can try out new ways of thinking and talking about teaching and learning, and do so among trusted colleagues at a low risk.

Therefore, viewed from a time perspective, changes in the significant networks would most likely surface prior to changes in the workgroups (unless of course the workgroup and the significant network are overlapping), placing the network focus closer to the micro level. Displacements in the significant networks would arguably be detectable before they became visible in the workgroups. On the other hand, widespread institutional change would not, other than under exceptional conditions, appear unless the workgroups are activated.

From a managerial perspective, changes in the workgroups might be the only ones of importance since teacher-training often is created to improve an institution's ability to support student learning, or to promote institutional policy. On the other hand, based on the perspective suggested here, the workgroups will not change unless the individuals believe in the prospect of the change at hand, that is, unless they first explore their personal ideas about teaching and learning, explorations which take place within the significant networks (Roxå and Mårtensson 2009a).

For managers it is therefore worthwhile assessing whether policies and instructions require changes in teaching practices that deviate too much from the teachers' conceptions. If so, these teachers will have many opportunities to obstruct managerial plans. Such obstructions would certainly distort the intentions of any policy and thereby affect the outcome negatively. What is more, teachers might even, backstage and hidden from the managers, construct negative conceptions about the managers' leadership and thus disturb future managerial opportunities (Coates et al. 2010). Or, as articulated by an experienced academic manager expressing concern about the power possessed by key individuals in informal networks: "[Y]ou need to think through the relationships carefully because they have powerful networks that can be used to support or undermine your efforts" (Kezar and Lester 2009, 111).

So far we have offered the significant network as a possible first focus for the meso level. If we were to measure the initial effects of teacher-training on the meso level, this is where we would start looking. Do teachers discuss teaching more, or in new ways backstage, with their significant others or their critical friends (Handal 1999)? Do they use concepts and perspectives from training during interactions with colleagues? If these and other results would appear, it would indicate effects.

We have also argued that effects in the significant networks might remain hidden backstage for a long time, making it insufficient for managers and others who are looking for a cultural shift in terms of teaching and learning. To reach such an objective with the means of teacher-training, the effects most certainly have to advance even further into the workgroups. If this takes place, the culture will potentially be influenced and possibly transformed. But we have also provided arguments for why teacher-training on its own is insufficient to accomplish a cultural shift. Balancing forces (Senge 2006) can counteract early attempts to change teaching practices, and risks related to professional identity will discourage members of the organisation from leaving the backstage conversations within the significant networks and openly enter the front-stage arena. This issue is something we will return to later in the section where we discuss the macro level.

The introduction of this text touched upon whether teacher-training should be organised individually, in workgroups, within disciplines, or in departments. This can also be assessed through the perspective presented here, again related to the meso level. If the purpose of training is to promote effects beyond the micro level, the meso level should in some way be addressed also during training. Organising teacher-training for workgroups seems to be a good idea (Roxå 2005, 2007). That would allow the individuals to negotiate meaning and power relations continuously already during training.

A potential problem appears if the power relations within workgroups are too strong and too firmly established. If so, they can cause strategic behaviour or an edited style of conversation among the participants during training. In such a case the process of negotiation among participants would be hampered and the effects could, in the worst case, be negative. An example of the latter could be illustrated by strong power holders with a negative attitude towards training who actively try to devalue training already during the experience and later even use the personal experience of training as evidence of its low value.

Inviting participants as significant networks, or promoting conversations with critical friends (Mårtensson, Roxå, and Olsson 2011), would most likely support an open style of discussion and a possibility for the network to identify and to work on a shared enterprise (Wenger 1999). On the other hand, these informal networks often run the risk of being governed by consensus (McPherson 2001), with the following risk that participants avoid critical debate and conflict. Again, this is a particularly important aspect for stakeholders who wish to promote a cultural shift.

### **The Macro Level**

A relevant question, at this stage is why anyone would want to influence the meso level in the first place. Universities have been teaching students and conducting research for a long time. Why would there be a need for change? One answer is that higher education now occupies politicians' and other stakeholders' interest simply because of the cost. In 2009 higher education reached the volume of 1.7 percent of Sweden's gross domestic product, making it the largest single part of state funding (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education [HSV] 2010).

The development is similar in the member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, see HSV 2010). The growing numbers of students represent another group of stakeholders as they invest time and money in their education. In Sweden, as in many other Western countries, students have had an important role in the growing demand for quality in university teaching; and so have academics themselves, using their reputation as an important argument while competing for the best students, best academics, and increased funding. All these changes place a growing demand on higher education institutions to develop better teaching practices, better, that is, in terms of improved student learning and, in the long run, in terms of improved research.

Above we have suggested the significant network or the workgroup as the locus for a meso level, and discussed possible effects or issues related to this level. We will now take one step further and suggest a perspective from above, or beyond, the meso level—that is, from the macro level. How can the meso level be conceived from a management level? How can a system of workgroups and/or significant networks be visualised and even influenced from the macro level? And what would the effects of teacher-training look like from the macro level, if there were any? By approximating the macro level with the institutional management, we deviate

slightly from our previous emphasis on a cultural perspective in the direction of the designed organisation lens.

When we now reintroduce the designed organisation (Ancona et al. 2009) it is important to bear in mind that this does not diminish organisational members' agency, nor the agency of networks or workgroups. The relationships between a rector/vice chancellor, a dean, or a head of department/chair, and the academics in workgroups and networks are never a one-way communication. Instead, individuals, networks, and workgroups are active in their construction of what they consider to be valuable and not; they interpret aspects they encounter in relation to their own history, identity, and projected future. The result is a process of negotiation where members of the organisation interpret decisions and policies according to their own agendas and trajectories. (For an interesting phenomenographic account on the relation between loyalty and academic freedom, see Åkerlind and Kayrooz 2003).

Such agentic processes do not always appear rational or easy to understand or to predict for outside observers. A classic example in illustrating this (even though from a different domain) is Paul Willis's (1978) work on "the lads," a group of schoolboys in a working-class area of England during the 1970s. These boys are clearly significant to each other and together they construct a group identity which opposes the school and all its officially painted dreams of career and a prosperous future; instead, they actively construct a working-class identity which unintentionally makes them ready and able for the factory the very first day they graduate. The author's main point is that groups like "the lads" actively construct their identities and the trajectories that come with them, not because they are rational or well reflected in all aspects, but simply because these are the trajectories they feel comfortable constructing. The description is an ample example of what Giddens (2004) labels as "structuration."

For our purposes we suggest that networks or groups of academics, in their agentic relationship with the world, resemble "the lads." Undeniably, academic teachers live different lives and have different resources at their disposal than "the lads," but as human beings they too try to orient themselves in a complex world. An attempt to describe these processes in an academic context has been offered by Harvey and Stensaker (2008). Through a theoretical perspective the authors propose four different ideal types varying in terms of how active a workgroup is in relation to, for instance, an organisational context. For the continuation of this text, as we now try to overlook the meso level from a macro perspective, we should remember this agentic relationship with the world on the part of the academics within networks and workgroups. They construct and continuously maintain their understanding about the reality around them. This is undoubtedly one of the most important insights for managers in higher education to make. Academics are trained through their research careers to construct personal perspectives and to defend them (Latour 1987), making them particularly active in their construction of the world. As Åkerlind and Kayrooz (2003) have shown, it does not mean that they always oppose management initiatives even though they have a tendency to scrutinise them heavily.

For managers who want to promote learning and development in knowledge-intensive organisations, Hannah and Lester (2009) put forward a useful perspective. On the meso level, they depict a number of "semi-autonomous knowledge network clusters" (Figure 1). In relation to the perspective used in this text, the clusters can be both workgroups and significant networks. But in addition, Hannah and Lester also describe the sum of networks within an organisation as a system and thereby offer an intelligible macro-perspective.

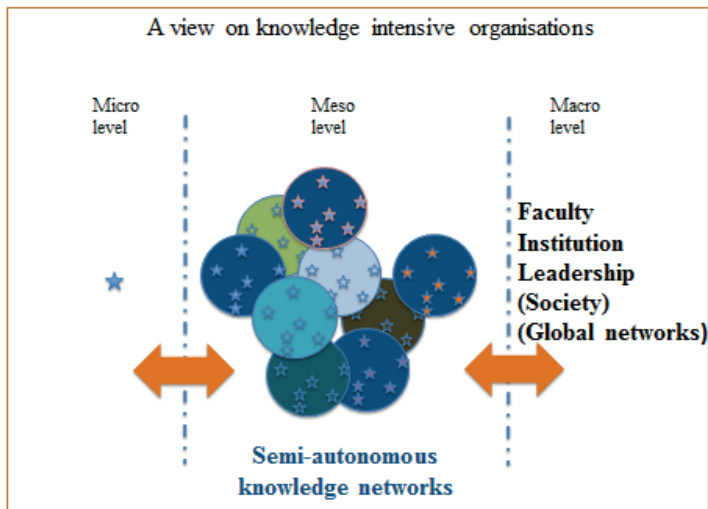


Figure 1 The micro, meso, and macro levels with semi-autonomous knowledge networks clearly visible at the meso level. Adapted from Hannah and Lester (2009).

Within this perspective, the individuals constitute the micro level and the semi-autonomous knowledge clusters the meso level. The macro level refers to the organisation as a whole. From the macro level the organisation becomes visible as a system of interrelated and overlapping clusters. Within clusters the individual members are connected to each other via links. Clusters are connected via “bridges” flowing from one member of a cluster to a member of another cluster. (The emerging picture confirms what has been found in other network studies [Granovetter 1973; Barabási 2003; Watts 2003].) A shortcoming, however, of the perspective suggested by Hannah and Lester (2009) is that it does not differentiate clusters as workgroups or significant networks as has been done in this text. Such a differentiation, as we have seen, can be crucial when observations about effects from teacher-training are to be interpreted and explained.

In their text, Hannah and Lester (2009) argue that the productive work in knowledge-intensive organisations appears mainly within the clusters. This is due to the complexity of the practice, making it impossible to accomplish detailed direction from the macro level. Innovation, adjustment, flexibility, or the pursuit of promising possibilities all ensue as a result of knowledgeable professionals working with the material at hand. The main problem for a manager, acting from the macro level, as described by Hannah and Lester, is to avoid stagnation because of excessive self-interest within the clusters (introversion), or a lack of identification with the organisation as a whole (detachment). As long as the clusters pursue their enterprises in relation to the interests of the organisation as a whole, all is well. As long as they interact with and challenge each other, further development will be fuelled. If not, the networks run the risk of falling prey to unproductive contentedness or to paralysing power struggles.

Hannah and Lester therefore recommend leaders of organisations to act on the basis that the clusters are the locus for development, but also to counteract the tendency towards introversion and detachment, by:

1. Demanding from each cluster a developmental enterprise;
2. Supporting individuals who display a developmental perspective on the part of their cluster and at the same time show an understanding for the organisation as a whole;
3. Encouraging clusters to put their results on display for critical review by other clusters by introducing suitable arenas;
4. Using a leadership which is both loose, by encouraging the clusters' self-chosen enterprises, and tight, by creating structures preventing the organisation to become partitioned;
5. Being explicit with an organisational vision, not only by the talk but also by the walk; and
6. Being patient.

We have discussed the development of teaching and learning from a network perspective elsewhere and problematized a phenomenon related to the second item in the list above, that is, a focus on individuals as change agents. It is not clear in academia to what extent leaders should focus on individuals while designing a strategy for change. "Rather we deem it likely that a multitude of inter-related initiatives over a long period of time distinguish any strategy successful in influencing academic teaching and learning cultures" (Roxå, Mårtensson, and Alveteg 2011, 109). As has been argued in this text, strategies for change in academia have often relied on the micro level, and produced small changes, at least very small in relation to the investments made. We argue that this is due to the meso level's ability to mitigate initiatives on the micro level.

For the purpose of this text, however, the six suggestions above outline a promising strategy for how to advance the effects of teacher-training from networks and clusters within the meso level out on the arena, which is the entire organisation. This further confirms how essential it is to influence the meso level in order to measure the systemic effects of teacher-training on the macro level. But the suggestions also imply that training alone will hardly produce a measurable impact on an institution as a whole. Other interrelated instruments have to be introduced. It means that a lack of measurable effects from training, viewed from a macro perspective, can be caused by bad teacher-training but also by a lack of enlightened determination among managers. It is also possible that some recurrent restructurings of academic development units (Gosling 2008, 2009; Harland and Staniforth 2008; Palmer, Holt, and Challis 2010) transpire not because these units are doing a bad job but because managers lack an effective understanding of how the entire organisation works or because they have an erroneous time perspective.

What emerges again and again is a pattern where effects from training propagate gradually. A personal engagement is in itself the very first sign of an effect. This engagement can appear backstage during collegial conversation within the significant network and/or in small changes in "private" teaching, possible to implement without collegial interference. If they pass this stage, the effects will appear as negotiations about teaching and learning within workgroups and these negotiations will often relate to professional identity issues and power. This is where management can choose to interfere from the macro level in the ways outlined by Hannah and Lester (2009), and thereby take the effects of teacher-training out into an even wider arena.

Different interests in an organisation typically balance each other out. Let us say that a number of clusters develop a new way of assessing students. If this starts to become known in the organisation as a whole and the notion is that it can spread further, it will trigger more



conservative clusters to act by forming what Senge (2006) describes as “balancing forces.” Furthermore, neutral clusters, if there is not much to gain from choosing sides, will withdraw without participating in the struggle between what we might call the radicals and the conservatives. Thus, the two active groups will struggle as long as they find it meaningful. However, neither side can win since there are no further supporters to gain from the neutrals. This might explain why resource-supported development projects, where individual teachers or groups of teachers receive funding for the pursuit of a particular teaching idea, very often fade away once the funding ends (Degerblad et al. 2005). External funding means that the organisation in fiscal terms is unaffected by the innovation. Once the funding ends, the organisation is affected, which is when the balancing forces start to act.

Again, the resolution to such a situation cannot be teacher-training alone. It must be a set of instruments implemented by open-minded, knowledgeable, determined, and patient leaders. If this is the case, the effects of teacher-training and other instruments in combination can become measurable beyond the meso level. If not, the effects of teacher-training will hardly reach beyond the borders of a limited number of workgroups and significant networks. The balancing forces mobilised by other workgroups and networks will counteract further spread.

## **Conclusion**

In this text we have pursued a cultural perspective on how the effects of teacher-training may or may not propagate beyond individual academic teachers. While doing so we find it appropriate to acknowledge that a cultural perspective does not embrace the entire complexity of any organisation (Ancona et al. 2009). Despite this limitation we believe that the cultural perspective is the most rewarding if one seeks to understand how the effects may become visible in an academic context. Indeed, academics’ tendency to form and defend personal perspectives in interaction with a few trusted colleagues very much supports this claim.

Effects cannot propagate without being negotiated in social contexts. We have suggested that this takes place on the meso level in significant networks and/or in workgroups. We have also argued that effects are most likely to become visible in the networks before they emerge in the workgroups. The key factor for effects to propagate on the meso level is determined by whether or not the networks and workgroups have established their own agenda for development.

This key factor appears as the most important one for managers to focus upon once they overlook an organisational landscape of networks and workgroups from the macro level. The effects of training are likely to propagate on the meso level and even beyond depending on whether or not the networks or workgroups have developmental agendas of their own. If they have, insights made by individuals or groups during training can fuel further advancement of those meso-level agendas.

In discussing the macro level we have pointed out several possible interventions that managers can use to enhance the effects of teacher-training. These measures are, however, not only tools for change; they are also analytical instruments that can be useful when evaluating teacher-training and its impact on the organisation as a whole. We strongly propose a combination of teacher-training and management interventions in order to render visible and measurable the effects of training on the macro level. Both variation in training and options for management interventions are discussed in the text.

Many institutions have struggled with the development of teaching and learning and most of these have done so by using a combination of measures, where teacher-training usually is one. The limited space here allows us to elaborate on less than a few of these examples but we would



like to direct the readers to a small number of useful references (Barrie, Ginns, and Prosser 2005; Pilot and Keesen 2006; Kezar 2007; Brew and Ginns 2008; Roxå, Olsson, and Mårtensson 2008; Mårtensson, Roxå, and Olsson 2011). Even though this text is mostly theoretical, it thereby lands in a perspective that has references in academic reality.

### Notes

1. The authors wish to acknowledge the valuable comments and language sophistications contributed to this text by Sara Håkansson, senior lecturer, Lund University.
2. We use training even though we prefer pedagogical courses or even staff development.
3. Local context in this chapter refers to the collegial social setting where the actual teaching practice takes place. It might, for instance, be within a discipline, within a programme, and/or within a department.

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# Paper VI



# Higher Education Commons – a framework for comparison of midlevel units in higher education organisations

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## Abstract

Socio culturally formed collegial contexts in the midlevel of higher education organisations have attracted increased attention from higher education researchers. It is assumed that development, change, and stability are dependent on norms, habits, and traditions in these contexts. This text introduces a framework useful for identifying and investigating these collegial contexts. The framework is applied on a material describing five academically strong *microcultures*. The result is promising as the framework illuminates critical features of these microcultures without depriving them of originality and uniqueness. The paper concludes that the framework presents a promising alternative to state-driven and bureaucratic perspectives as well as to market inspired perspectives.

## Introduction

Following socio-cultural perspectives, an increasing number of scholars have emphasised the midlevel in higher education organisations as a key to understand teaching practices, traditions, change, and stability (Trowler 2008; Gibbs 2013). They share the idea that academic teaching forms traditions, cultures, and norms that influence individual academics and contributes to the stability in higher education often commented upon. Jawitz (2009), for example, reports on how new academics learn to assess student performance according to the norms governing the local disciplinary context they become a part of. He shows a significant variation in these processes in one South African university. Gibbs, Knapper, and Piccinin (2009) investigate how high performance departments construct and maintain quality by establishing specific views and locally adapted perspectives on what it means to be an academic teacher. Trowler (2008) describes how local cultures, also known as *teaching and learning regimes*, influence everyday conversations, views on teaching methods, students, and so on. In all these examples academic teachers collectively and continuously construct normative structures that in turn influence them during everyday practices. These structures have the potential to hamper development and change, but also to defend and maintain existing levels of quality, for example, in times of reduced funding.

Even though these scholars agree on the importance of an organisational midlevel perspective, there is less accord on what constitutes these midlevel organisational units. Suggestions include the department (Knight and Trowler 2000; Gibbs, Knapper, and Piccinin 2008; Gibbs, Knapper, and Piccinin 2009), the workgroup (Harvey and Stensaker 2008; Trowler 2008; Edvardsson-Stiwne 2009; Walsh 2010; Roxå and Mårtensson 2011/2013), and the disciplinary community (Henkel 2005; Hounsell and Anderson 2009; Jawitz 2009; Kreber 2009). Thus, there are a multitude of arguments for the local collegial context, i.e. the midlevel, as being important for an understanding of change and stability in higher education organisations.

This paper argues that what is lacking is a deeper understanding of the nature of these local contexts, so that they become recognisable within their respective organisation. Assumedly, this lack of understanding is a reason for the above variation among the suggestions on what



the collegial contexts are: disciplinary communities, departments, workgroups, communities of practice, or something else. Further evidence for this confusion emerged in Roxå and Mårtensson (2011/2013). When leaders, managers, and student union representatives at a traditional university were asked to identify collegial contexts associated with high quality in teaching and in research, they could not do so. They lacked both a shared understanding of what to look for and an individual capacity to identify them. This absence of a shared understanding of the organisation can be understood as an effect of the shortage of research into higher education organisations. A view supported by Tight (2012) as he critically reviewed existing research in the area of higher education leadership and management and summarised: “By comparison with the ‘how to’ literature on the management of institutions of higher education – largely written, of course, by authors with experience of ‘doing’ management – the empirically based, more theorized and critical literature on this area is less developed” (ibid.134). There appears to be a general shortage of usable theoretical perspectives for assessing the variation within the organisational midlevel.

This paper introduces a framework from political science potentially useful for identifying and analysing collegial contexts independently of where in the higher education organisation they appear. The framework also reveals the inner structure of these contexts so that nuances and variation emerge, which pave the way for further research. It is argued that the framework has a potential to advance research on higher education organisations. Below, the framework is being introduced and applied to material describing academically strong collegial contexts in a research-intensive university.

### **Commons or limited resource pools**

The framework introduced here was established and elaborated by the Nobel prize laureate, Elinor Ostrom, who spent decades exploring *commons* or *limited resource pools* (Ostrom 1990; Ostrom 2010). These are institutionalised social contexts populated by groups of people who collectively share responsibility for a resource on which they are dependent. Typically in Ostrom’s research these are fishermen and a fishing area, farmers and irrigations systems, local communities and groundwater reservoirs, or villages and woodland. In her seminal book, *Governing the Commons. The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (1990), Ostrom uses hundreds of documented case studies and through them she describes functioning commons, evolving commons, and failed commons. In all examples the groups of individuals shared or failed to share a sense of responsibility for a resource they all were dependent on. The perspective has later been used on various domains in society (Hess and Ostrom 2011), but never on collegial contexts in higher education organisations.

An important aspect here is the explicit intention Ostrom formulated about her research on commons. She has repeatedly critiqued an essay entitled *The Tragedy of the Commons* (Hardin 1968). Here Hardin argues that due to human egoism a group of individuals will always fail to maintain a limited resource (a commons) for which they share a responsibility. They will inevitably fall for the egoistic temptation to overharvest a fishing area, a ground water reservoir, or any other resource and thereby destroy it. Such resources, Hardin argues, can only be maintained either through state-control and legislation or through private ownership using the dynamics of the market. Ostrom’s empirical research contradicts Hardin’s theoretical argument as she presents an overwhelming number of cases in which groups of individuals indeed maintain limited resources through self-governance.

At the heart of Ostrom’s framework lie the norms that influence individual members of a commons to continue to share the responsibility with the other members. Norms are, as

defined by Ostrom, “shared concepts of what must, must not, or may be appropriate actions or outcomes in particular types of situations” (Ostrom 2005, 112). In short, the norms regulate behaviour and formulate expectation of appropriate behaviour, that is, norms influence the members of a shared context towards certain behaviours. But norms also help to define a group’s culture and thereby make it distinguishable from other groups through what can be summarised as: This is how we do things round here (Alvesson 2002). In turn, this relates to experiences of belonging and identity.

In what follows, Ostrom’s descriptions of commons will be compared to a small number of local collegial contexts in a research-intensive higher education institution. It is assumed that since these contexts are academically highly functional they may display features that are similar to those of functioning commons described in Ostrom’s research. If this assumption holds true, the framework and the organisational aspects it reveals will make it possible to identify, compare, and contrast academic midlevel units in higher education organisations.

Thus, in the following a comparison is made between the features of a functioning commons, as suggested by Ostrom, and strong microcultures (academic collegial contexts of high quality) as they are described in a previous study (Roxå and Mårtensson 2011/2013). The aim is twofold: 1) to determine whether the microcultures would qualify as commons, and 2) to test a successful theoretical framework in the context of higher education research. If successful, the framework will discern important aspects of how groups of academics institutionalise routines related to teaching, but furthermore, it will aid higher education researchers in their pursuit of understanding higher education organisations.

### **The material used**

The material for analysis originates from a recent investigation at a research-intensive university. In this paper we revisit [this](#) material and investigate how the organisational features of these microcultures match those found in the functioning self-governing commons or limited resource pools studied by Ostrom. Below, quotes from respondents in the original study will be used to illustrate various claims. All quotes are translated from Swedish by the authors.

The case-based study, inspired by ethnographic methods, explored how teaching quality is viewed, reflected upon, and enacted within five strong academic culturally formed collegial contexts in the organisational midlevel, also known as microcultures (Roxå and Mårtensson 2011/2013). “Strong” in this study means having an established good academic *reputation* or standing for quality in both teaching and research, as perceived by students and other academics outside the microculture. Microcultures are defined here as groups of academics working together in a university, tied together by sharing a discipline, department, working group, or educational programme. The microcultures investigated ranged in size from 10 to 60 members. The main focus of the original study was to enhance an overall understanding of how academic microcultures function in relation to good practices of teaching and student learning.

### *Research process*

Step 1: The five microcultures were selected from three different faculties within the university. The selection process started by asking deans, vice-deans, heads of departments and teaching committees (11 people in total), as well as student representatives in those faculties, to identify successful (strong) microcultures.

Step 2: The suggestions resulting from step 1. were triangulated with documented results from internal and external national quality assurance evaluations, as well as with the researchers' personal experiences from working in the faculties for over a decade. The microcultures selected should be:

- Strong in teaching as well as in research (the latter as defined by an external research assessment exercise conducted three years earlier).
- Teaching activities at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
- Fairly large number of members (minimum of 10) as well as number of students per year (range from 150 to 1000).

Step 3: After selection, representatives from each microculture were approached and asked if they were willing to participate in the study. All accepted. Next, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Swedish, recorded and fully transcribed: 4–5 interviews in each microculture, individually with leaders, senior and junior academics as well as with groups of students. Altogether 45 people were interviewed: 17 academics and 28 students. All staff interviews in each microculture were completed before interviewing the students. Interview questions concerned internal issues such as group values and teaching practices, decision-making processes, group history, improvements and developments, as well as collaborations outside the microculture, relations to formal, organisational structures and so on.

The interviewees were all individuals who in various ways had decided to remain inside the microcultures. A deliberate decision was taken not to interview those who had left. This was because the aim was to study how high quality microcultures in higher education function and how this was described from the inside. For further information about the microcultures, readers are directed to the original report (Roxå & Mårtensson 2011/2013).

### **The limited resource**

A crucial point in this comparison is the limited resource. What could constitute the limited resource for the microcultures in question? According to Ostrom, commons or limited resource pools are formed in relation to, “a shared resource that is vulnerable to social dilemmas” (Hess and Ostrom 2007, 13). “Social dilemmas” refer to two things. First, the resource is such that it is tempting for individuals to extract more than their legitimate share, and that if one member uses more than what is agreed upon the others will suffer since part of the resource is destroyed. This is the principle of *subtractability* (Ostrom 2005). Second, if nothing is done to prevent it, the resource is open for individuals external to the commons to access. Consequently, the members have to uphold a boundary between those who are, according to them, entitled to use it and those who are not. This is the principle of *excludability* (ibid.)

With the support in the microculture study, it is suggested here that a positive *reputation* or academic standing qualifies as a resource in relation to both subtractability and excludability. All members of a strong microculture collectively benefit from a positive reputation. It strengthens them collectively when undergraduate or postgraduate students or new academic colleagues are recruited and when collaboration with other units is initiated. It is definitely an asset when funding is sought for various projects.

It is clear from the microculture study that the reputation is perceived as important. “If we have bad teaching, we cannot possibly have good research ... uh, we must have, we must

show that we have, the best courses” (senior academic). It is also clear that if one member fails to produce according to the expected standards, the resource (the reputation) runs the risk of being undermined. A single failure to meet standards will thereby rub off on the others; at least this is how interviewees describe things. Such a decline in reputation will affect future prospects. In addition, there is a constant risk that individual members will be tempted to become free riders and use the reputation solely for their own personal gain. This is equivalent to extracting from the resource without showing responsibility for its maintenance, illustrating *subtractability* in relation to reputation or academic standing

In the material used for this analysis it is clear that the microcultures’ reputation is defended. Only the members can decide how and when it should be used. For example, the members in the study became irritated when others interfered with the process of creating new alliances or partners. This can be seen as an action to guard the reputation. The reputation is connected to certain knowledge and skills developed within the microculture. It is an indication of the level of performance that can be expected from members if they choose to engage. It is thus important for the members to clarify who are and who are not associated with the reputation. The problem they face is that others who are not recognised members might want to associate themselves with the microculture in order to profit from its reputation. This can potentially harm the microculture, as the individual using the reputation might not be able to perform up to the standards or the person might act according to values considered negative by the other members. This is why *excludability* is relevant in relation to a strong and positive reputation.

The importance of reputation is also connected to deeper layers of wider academic values. These show, for instance, in ingrained academic routines for referencing and strong feelings against academic plagiarism and cheating. Thus, when the microcultures studied display strong protective attitudes towards their reputation, they align themselves with some of the most important facets of academic culture. A positive academic reputation becomes a currency in what has been described by Blackmore and Kandiko (2011) as the *prestige economy* of the academy, where the currency (here a positive reputation) is accumulated through recognition not only by academic colleagues but also by all the various partners the individual microculture relates to.

Consequently and arguably, a good reputation or academic standing can be viewed as a limited resource in the sense specified by Ostrom. A strong reputation is definitely an asset. It might not be consumed in quantitative ways as in most of the studies she carried out, but it can be destroyed with severe consequences for the members as a collective; a fact that calls for constant concern for the reputation.

### **Comparison between the theoretical framework and the microcultures**

At the heart of Ostrom’s research lies the problem faced by the commons studied: How can they remain as functioning commons over considerable time spans without exhausting the limited resource? Ostrom (1990) thus focuses on discernible crucial features of internal and external governance in functioning commons. These are called “design principles”.

“By ‘design principles’ I [Ostrom] mean an essential element of condition that helps to account for the success of these institutions in sustaining the CPRs [the resource pools] and gaining the compliance of generations after generations of appropriators [those who are dependent on the resource] to the rules in use” (ibid., 90).

Design principles relate to norms or rules, but as pointed out by Ostrom, the rules are not the same in different commons. Instead rules vary. If they did not, she explains, the various commons could not adapt to the local and relatively unique situations they are in. Hence, this accounts for the variation in rules organising the commons. On the other hand, the rules manage to fulfil similar purposes despite the fact that they are not identical. Different rules in different commons can thus match similar design principles.

If the comparison suggested in this paper is meaningful, the strong microcultures studied by Roxå and Mårtensson (2011/2013) should display at least a large proportion of the design principles identified by Ostrom. These principles are (Hess and Ostrom 2007):

1. Clearly defined boundaries and memberships.
2. Rules [norms] in use are well matched to local needs and conditions.
3. Individuals affected by these rules can usually participate in modifying the rules.
4. The right of community members to devise their own rules is respected by external authorities.
5. An established system for self-monitoring members' behaviour exists.
6. A graduated system of sanctions is available.
7. Access to low-cost conflict-resolution mechanisms for community members.
8. Nested enterprises—that is, appropriation, provision, monitoring and sanctioning, conflict resolution, and other governance activities—are organised in a nested structure with multiple layers of activities.

In the following we shall go through these eight design principles and see how they apply to the findings from the strong microcultures studied (Roxå and Mårtensson 2011/2013).

#### *1. Clearly defined boundaries and memberships.*

From within the microcultures there was never a doubt about who was a member or not. Even in the collegial context that was imbedded in a larger department, everyone knew who belonged to the microculture and who did not. In those units that had remained a department, this was even more self-evident. From the outside it was somewhat different. Deans, teaching committee heads, and student representatives, interviewed in the selection-phase of the study had problems identifying strong microcultures. They claimed it to be much easier to distinguish problematic collegial contexts. Strong units did not attract attention. Nevertheless, once the five microcultures were identified through different sources, managers and student unions acknowledged them as distinct and strong units.

As for membership, the situation resembles the boundary issue. Internally, colleagues acknowledged membership continuously. They knew who belonged to the unit. Throughout the study a pattern emerged that it was hard to become a member of these units; the microcultures were all highly selective when recruiting new members. But, once accepted, this membership was never questioned. On the contrary, for example, when members for different reasons did not perform up to the standards expected, measures were taken and energy spent by other members to support the colleague. On one occasion and in response to a direct question whether it would be better to exclude the person from the unit, the answer from a senior member came emphatically “No, we need her competence!” In another example, the leader of the unit tried hard and over a long time to find the appropriate support for one teacher who appeared to have lost his energy.

From the outside and especially from the management level, various suggestions for collaboration were suggested. For different reasons, deans and heads of departments wanted units to create collaborative projects with other individuals and units. All these attempts were reacted to negatively. Frequently the interviewees stressed that they themselves were constantly looking for potential partners and that they should decide for themselves whom to collaborate with. Again this illustrates a deliberate selectivity by the groups concerning whom they wanted to be associated with. One interviewee told the story of how she agreed to an appointment to discuss collaboration with a colleague from another discipline only because the dean suggested it. “So, I listen. She was very nice. But I don’t share that perspective. It wouldn’t work. We [members in the microculture] collaborate if it is interesting, not because someone tells us to” (senior academic). She argued that it comes down to basic underlying assumptions. If these do not match, collaboration is of no interest.

It is important to stress that all the microcultures studied did collaborate widely. They frequently emerged as winners of research grants together with national and international partners or as creators of new study programmes organised jointly with other units within or outside the university.

### *2. Rules [norms] in use are well matched to local needs and conditions.*

Two comments may function as an illustration of this point. They relate to the reform higher education in Europe had been going through previous to the interviews, the Bologna Process. The process included that all syllabi should be rewritten in ways that focused on explicitly formulated learning outcomes. One interviewee describes: “We started to use this idea about learning outcomes, because it appeared to be interesting. We had a couple of meetings. But then came a series of directives from the faculty administration. Purely bureaucratic. So, we lost interest” (senior academic). The other example refers to the same process. The unit in question was asked to be a pilot by trying out how learning outcomes would apply in the discipline area at hand. After some time, the answer was: “We are not sure we want to be perceived as being good at this” (senior academic).

The two comments illustrate how the units sternly defend their way of doing things and their attitudes towards ways not adapted to their own perceived local needs. One microculture saw the potential in learning outcomes, but only as they understood them. When more centrally formulated rules interfered with their own interpretation they could no longer see the relevance. But even further, as shown in the second example, the microcultures displayed an awareness of how they as a group, as constituted through rules, norms, and practices, were perceived by others in the organisation. Thus, they not only match rules according to their local needs, they also protect them as being intimately connected to how they are perceived by others in the organisation.

### *3. Individuals affected by these rules can usually participate in modifying them.*

All microcultures had internally transparent and well-known decision making routines, even though these looked and worked very differently from unit to unit. It was commonly known where and how decisions were made. All interviewees knew about these routines and referred to the people to talk to as issues occurred. In addition, all five microcultures allowed great freedom for individual teachers, as long as no problems were reported. “We need teachers who believe in what they do” (senior academic). It appeared that the clear structures for leadership in combination with the freedom offered to individual teachers created a generous space of action both for academics individually but also for individuals to influence how things are done in the microculture.

The confidence in the leadership structures also included students. They were all clear about who to talk to if something did not work as intended or if they wanted to suggest anything. Students felt listened to, and taken seriously: “They are open and serious and explicit even if they do not change things” (student).

*4. The right of community members to devise their own rules is respected by external authorities.*

This principle is somewhat different from the others, since it relates to wider organisational agents, around and above the microcultures at hand. Ostrom discusses this issue at great length (Ostrom 1990) and describes the intricate balancing act between external authorities pressing too hard and thereby damaging the local norms of the commons or maintaining a laissez-faire attitude and thereby hampering the evolution of appropriate norms.

Two units are still departments of their own while the other three are parts of larger, sometimes very large, departments. In one of these three, the members described this as unproblematic. It is a small unit of eleven individuals who see no problem in creating the space needed to govern themselves despite being embedded. Instead they engage in the management of the department; one of them, for example, is deputy head of the department. Another of the three has recently been merged forming a larger department. The leader of this microculture especially expressed deep concerns for how the budget will be balanced in relation to the other units in the department. She was also concerned about the future identity of the members. The merger, she said, is blurring who belongs and not. The third of the embedded units has worked intensely to maintain its independence. Of the two independent departments, one has been instructed to move to a new building, and this managerial decision has been met with suspicion and resistance, partly because it blurs the boundaries with other units and partly because it makes the members worried about their right for self-governance. The fifth unit, a department, has managed due to its strong ethos to stay independent despite the tendency across the university to create larger departments. These snapshots highlight a somewhat problematic relationship with senior management in relation to the design principle.

It is also clear from the interviews that the microcultures through their members work hard to orient themselves in the wider organisation. Many examples emerge where the microcultures have been proactive in relation to decisions made beyond their borders. These are situations where they engaged early in the processes in order to maintain the degree of independence they themselves experience as important.

Nevertheless, the microcultures display a constant awareness of how the right to self-governance will develop in the future. They also take measure to keep this right.

*5. An established system for self-monitoring members' behaviour exists.*

*6. A graduated system of sanctions is available.*

These two principles refer to processes where the members show interest in each other's doings and engage when they find reason to do so. All microcultures report instances when this has happened: a senior teacher's teaching did not match the teaching quality expected in the unit; one academic did not approve of the direction the unit was heading; one individual developed research into a new area and the problem, shared by all seniors, concerned how they could connect this research to teaching, and so on. Interviews reveal intense processes where falling work standards or unexpected turns of event result in elaborated programmes for support and the restoration of collegial trust. One formal leader described the efforts to



restore a group of teachers where conflicts threatened the standards expected. It was a process stretching over several years and included many types of support. Clearly, it is not the absence of problems that signifies these strong microcultures, but rather the degree of concern and the actions taken to monitor the level of quality aspired to within the unit.

A senior academic illustrates the level of engagement when he describes a problem where another senior teacher's quality in teaching is below standards: "If we have bad teaching, we cannot possibly have good research ... uh, we must have, we must show that we have, the best courses" (senior academic). He then continues to tell about how this academic has been offered support and opportunities, but has also been given a clear message that the current level of teaching quality is not sufficient. Again, the level of concern reveals an awareness of and engagement in colleagues' professional practices.

One interviewee, a junior academic, was newly recruited to one of the microcultures because he had a research profile from a new field for the unit. He immediately was assigned to design a new undergraduate course based on his field of expertise. During the interview he explained how the leader of the microculture had approached him about the examination of students. She as being more experienced generously offered her assistance during the process of designing exam tasks. A support he thankfully accepted. The routine repeated itself during the marking process when the leader once again offered her expertise and judgement as a support. Again the help was accepted and appreciated.

It is easy to see how the new academic was monitored, even though it was offered as help and support. The leader wanted to ensure that the quality in the crucial phases of examination and marking was carried out according to expected standards. Nevertheless, it was offered and accepted as support, not as critique or surveillance.

What emerges here is an illustration of constant internal monitoring of quality, even though this means monitoring the work of colleagues. It is done in the name of the reputation aspired for by the microculture and defended once it is established, and against a background of trustful internal collegial relations. The monitoring is also in itself part of the graduated system of sanctions in place. Because these sanctions are adapted to the specific situation at hand and the individuals involved, the sanctions do not necessarily have to be experienced as sanctions but rather as support and opportunities for development. But, the graduate sanctions can occasionally be tightened, as also shown in these examples.

This view of sanctions is entirely in line with what is described by Ostrom (1990) and what has later been shown in subsequent research in relation to various types of commons (Janssen et al. 2010; Vollaard and Ostrom 2010).

The monitoring appears to be internalised to a degree where individual academics discipline themselves according to the standards expected. When asked where the ambition to be a good teacher comes from, one teacher makes several attempts to answer the question:

"They were almost without exception very good lecturers, so... there is a kind of... there is absolutely no expectation about ... or, like you have to be as good as... uh, because it is difficult, but ... uh, they are putting up ... like a standard for how it should be ..." (junior academic).



His failure to answer the question can be interpreted as having internalised the standards entirely. They had become an integrated part of what it means to belong to this specific microculture.

Despite these examples of monitoring, not a single interviewee reacted towards them as a limitation of academic freedom. Instead the members aligned themselves with the norms and engaged with mutual responsibility. This duality in the nature of academic freedom relates to empirical research by Åkerlind and Kayrooz (2003). In their sample, 165 Australian academics display a conceptual understanding of academic freedom as a composite of *freedom from* constraints on academic activities and a deeply felt *responsibility for* the context of which they were a part. These aspects of freedom have in other contexts been described as a combination of two contradictory elements: a *negative freedom*, freedom from constraints, and a *positive freedom*, a freedom to act and construct reality (Berlin 2000).

#### *7. Access to low-cost conflict-resolution mechanisms for community members.*

All units had established structures for information sharing and discussions about how to proceed in various matters. It was also clear who was in charge during periods of negotiation. These processes were often arranged on recurrent occasions, which in turn also were discussed. One unit had an annual departmental conference, traditionally organised and chaired by junior members of the academic staff. Here ideas emerged and were negotiated, but the ideas had a tendency not to be put into action. This changed when junior members suggested and introduced a web based protocol clearly stating who was responsible for what and when results should be reported. This routine also included the senior members. One unit gathered twice a day during the coffee breaks where matters concerning everybody were discussed in a relaxed atmosphere. One unit had organised a system of critical friends, meeting regularly to discuss teaching content and forms. Another unit kept all teaching material in one designated office for everyone to use. This was an opportunity frequently used by the members.

But, the most striking aspect emerging in the study was the level of *collegial trust*. It has already been stated that all microcultures made considerable effort to maintain and to restore trust once problems occurred. But they did so in very different ways. Arguably, the strategies for maintaining and restoring trust as well as sharing of information were developed in the units and thereby intrinsically adapted to the context at hand and the specific individuals working together.

Having said this, descriptions of conflicts did surface in the interviews on several occasions, but always expressed as something that was handled directly and openly during meetings or as private conversations. The level of trust clearly plays a vital part in these processes.

#### *8. Nested enterprises—that is, appropriation, provision, monitoring and sanctioning, conflict resolution, and other governance activities—are organised in a nested structure with multiple layers of activities.*

The two larger microcultures were governed in two different ways. In one, the unit consisted of three units in reality, each headed by a senior academic. These three senior academics met regularly and discussed various issues. Consequently, this unit displayed an explicitly nested organisation.

The second of the two larger units consisted of 60 individuals. Here, the decision processes were located at the coffee meetings and included all members, and at a weekly meeting where

the ten most senior staff members met with the head of the department. During these weekly meetings every matter of concern for the entire unit was discussed and decided upon. All the interviewees confirmed this picture and pointed out that the coffee break meetings were the most important arena for decision-making, even though they all were aware of the weekly senior meetings.

The other three microcultures which all were smaller did not display these structures of nested decision making.

Furthermore, all five units were engaged in the decision-making processes in the organisation around them. In this they took a proactive part and engaged in early stages as soon as they perceived anything to be of great importance to them. If not, they kept a low profile and performed according to what was expected by them.

As the comparison above shows, the design principles all apply to the microcultures studied, at least tentatively. What is clear is that the design principles take different forms in different microcultures, just as emphasised by Ostrom. Although the norms or rules take different shapes depending on the local situation, they do fulfil similar purposes, something that also is congruent with Ostrom's research. The successful commons she studied had all developed rules suitable for maintaining the limited resources they were dependent upon. Hence, they developed different rules but ones that fulfilled purposes similar to those of the design principles. This allowed them to adapt to the specificities of the local reality they inhabited.

## **Discussion**

The starting point here was the literature emphasising the midlevel in higher education organisations as the key to understanding teaching practices, traditions, change, or stability. The literature, however, refers to various existing organisational entities, like departments, workgroups, or disciplinary communities. Another option emerges through the use of the framework introduced by Ostrom. Instead of referring to existing organisational levels and contexts, a number of design principles emerge as useful for describing microcultures where they appear in the organisation.

It is suggested here that with a focus on design principles, it becomes possible to identify qualitative differences among various midlevel collegial contexts in higher education organisations. The units focused upon can very well be departments, disciplines, communities of practice, or something else. But as long as they constitute some kind of microculture they can be researched through the design principles offered by Ostrom. Furthermore, her emphasis on design principles allows for collegial contexts to adapt to local specificities instead of relating to a bureaucratic template of rules.

Of all design-features discussed in this analysis, the microcultures' relationship to managerial authorities appears to be the most problematic. Not just from the microcultures' perspective as they energetically manoeuvre to maintain their independence but also due to the fact that the managers in various ways were unaware of their existence. The units studied often tried to balance between being invisible inside the formal organisation while constructing a reputation in relation to those they themselves identified as important partners. This aspect becomes even more important as the management role of academic leaders become more accentuated.

We therefore conclude that the five microcultures in the study display many similarities to the commons studied and described by Ostrom. We further argue that the use of her

investigations into collaborative responsibility and the resulting framework can contribute widely to a better understanding of higher education organisations, especially in investigations into midlevel collegial contexts. These results are thereby in agreement with and expand upon the results presented by scholars mentioned in the introduction of this text.

Finally and most importantly, the perspective developed by Ostrom can allow for higher education organisations, dependent as they are on originality and creativity, to escape the threat of state-based bureaucratic control or the competitive aspects of the market. The latter is adapted to a different kind of competitive reality than the one higher education is expected to construct for the benefit of student learning and personal development.

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