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Auditing as the eternal present: Organisational transformation in British higher education

Introduction

This article examines organisational transformation within Higher Education in Britain. In the process it highlights the focus upon the 'how' rather than the 'why' of organisational existence that guides these changes. Drawing on recent experiences of auditing of subject provision within Universities, it is argued that the new discourse of managerialism that is reflected in the drive for 'quality assurance' constitutes the triumph of method over purpose. Internal to the thinking motivating these transformations is an uncritical attachment to putatively universal forms of market-oriented practice. This, in turn, involves a process of historical forgetting vis-à-vis the academy's longer-standing practices that have been rooted in bodies of organisational knowledge developed out of a distinct ethos. The resulting sense of an 'eternal present' constructs points of difference from newly dominant discourses of organisational practice as merely 'old-fashioned' customs to be overcome.

A denial of the possibility of difference with regard to local practices and forms of knowledge has particular consequences for the possibility of mounting any form of critique. It is assumed that ideas of 'best practice' are generic and transcend specific forms of organisational knowledge evolved at the front line of educational service delivery. Knowledge developed through practice (phronesis) is sidelined in favour of the imposition of a supposed technically neutral knowledge assisted by the growing army of those now charged with 'quality assurance'. Little space is then left for the practically reasonable decision-making that must always be a matter of judgement learned in contexts that are subject to change. It is on this basis that we examine the idea of the 'eternal present' that now characterises the ascendancy of method over purpose in British higher education institutions.

Modes of transformation

The wider context to organisational changes in British Higher Education is the climate of neo-liberalism in Britain, which has resulted in an ever-greater penetration into management in Universities, as elsewhere, of market-orientated practices whose power rests upon their supposed self-evidence. From this basis critique is frequently dismissed as impractical, ideologically motivated, or even anarchic and irresponsible. When this is coupled with sets of practices whose logic, intentionally or by default, seeks to reproduce its supposed self-evidence on a routine basis, it becomes a powerful tool aimed at control and conformity. Illustrative here is the Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) view that 'Institutional review is…a continuous process, with each subject review contributing information to the overall picture' (QAA, 'Handbook for Academic Review'). The 'overall picture' of quality built up here appears powerfully self-evident precisely for being so ubiquitous and inescapable (almost in the manner of natural phenomena). After all, who can be against quality (Wilkinson and Willmott, 1995)? Although justifications for the supposed objectivity of such a picture are noticeably absent, there is a questioning of the idea of professional self-interests through the introduction of new procedures and standards that are informed by the student as 'customer'. This aligns itself with more general changes throughout the public sector in which it is held that: 'the consumer...can exert pressure on providers to improve the quality of services...Performance indicators monitor the progress and compare the performance of different delivery agencies. League tables enable the users of service to compare the performance of competing delivery agencies' (Butcher, 1995: 158).

In terms of the content of management practices there has been a move towards concerns with what were once regarded as being 'outside' of the remit of management. As 'scientific' approaches found themselves under increasing question, practices appeared which encompassed employee emotions, values and motivations, along with attention to organisational culture in general. Total quality and human resource management, the learning organisation and knowledge management are symptomatic of these general developments (for example, see Knights and Willmott 2000; Legge, 1995). These strategies have been sold as solutions to the problems of public-sector performance.

In order to monitor external environments to produce appropriate internal responses according to these recipes of innovation, it becomes necessary to have whole armies of statisticians and evaluation units so that no apparent deviation from optimum performance is permitted. Once deviations are located the solution should be rapid and all must learn from the experience (the 'learning organisation') in order that there is no repetition of the problem.

In the process current practices become the enemy of innovation. Within Higher Education, this 'year zero' approach to organisation is significantly reinforced by the QAA, whose auditors are required to make judgements that will 'help providers identify readily any matters requiring remedial action…and provide a focus for any follow up that the Agency may have to carry out' (QAA, 'Making Judgements in Subject Review'). At an individual level an absence of commitment represents the need for personal development. This process is ably assisted by annual staff appraisals where opportunities (sic) are afforded for individuals to consider their performance in relation to the ability to meet organisational objectives.

What we see in performance appraisals is a replication of the separation between knowledge and context. Put another way, it is the separation between ability, in terms of monitoring and accounting for actions and capability, in terms of being positioned in order that one's actions have a tangible effect upon a given environment (May, 2000). The result of this distinction is a whole series of attempts to determine the method of practice through new modes of supervision, surveillance and appraisals that increasingly drown out any sense of the wider purpose of practice. The growing tendency here is that, through focusing on 'how' rather than 'why', the individual's performance comes into the full glare of the spotlight while environmental features informing performance are moved into the background. This process finds its highest expression in the performance-related pay that now exists in English schools, with moves to introduce it into Universities on the horizon.

Other 'how' measures include the collecting and monitoring of information between different components of a workload; the ratio of lecturers to students; the overall numbers of students in an institution and the volume of students moving through it. These say nothing of quality, only quantity. Given this, they are accompanied by quality audits, performance appraisals, evaluation questionnaires, team-building exercises and the pursuit of 'best practice'. Staff-development programmes are then introduced on such topics as time management; effective professionalism; the maintenance of quality in the face of increasing workloads (sic) and 'top tips' for professionals seeking to achieve high marks in quality audits. Here again, however, (organisational) purpose becomes subordinated to (individual) method.

The modes for seeking to determine 'how' by 'what' also incorporate forms of surveillance that seek to traverse organisational space, effectively denying that 'each university is a mix of organizing practices which are historically located…'(Prichard and Willmott, 1997: 289). In these circumstances objective measures become those that are free from context and so lie beyond the supposed particularity of practices and experiences. Thus the Quality Agency's reviewers now no longer observe any actual teaching since TQA (Teaching Quality Assurance) has been replaced by the once removed QA (Quality Assurance) in which the teaching context disappears entirely in favour of an exclusive focus on quality procedures. Indeed in the QAA's view, a 'critical test' of specific educational provision is whether it 'is worthy of dissemination to, and emulation by other providers. 'Reviewers will wish to consider the practicality of a feature being emulated elsewhere. An exemplar is "a model for imitation" (Oxford Shorter English Dictionary). "Exemplary" signifies not just excellence, but excellence which is generalisable and transferable' (QAA, 'Making Judgements in Subject Review').

The practice of communication and decision-making in such cases produces texts on organisational performance. These, in turn, add to the assumption that knowledge can be unproblematically separated from the context of action. These texts constitute knowledge via a description of practices, which leaves knowledge by acquaintance (including context-sensitivity and forms of communication and understanding between practitioners) to be dismissed as reproducing professional discretion which itself is the target of these transformative practices. An example here is the QAA's move to establish generic subject benchmarking, which has required rewrites of degree programmes and intended learning outcomes in order to comply with the broad subject statements that are used in academic review (Copeland and McAdoo, 2001: 33).

Attempts to maintain the supposition of administrative neutrality in these processes are ably assisted by the idea that measures are trans-local and so generally applicable. The result is self-fulfilling: 'The replication of local 'events' as identical (though identity is always more or less a fiction) makes possible...systems of measurement, the accumulation of statistical data, the formulation of rules and instructions applicable from one setting and time to others' (Smith, 1999: 87). If a scheme of performance monitoring or procedure then fails, few will ask why. Instead, numerous energies are turned to 'how' its effectiveness can be improved.

The penetration of these practices into Universities - a major component of which involves linking funding to 'value for money' (QAA, 'Proposals for a New Quality Assurance Framework, 1998) - is especially problematic insofar as the massive expansion of the Higher Education sector in Britain from the 1960s involved the recognition of the need for state, rather than market, provision of University education if more than a select few were to benefit. The goal of Universities was the provision of universal educational services where the market would only produce inequalities of opportunity and unfairness. The organisational knowledge applicable to Universities, therefore, was recognised as being different in form and content from the private sector. Yet these residual non-market commitments are increasingly forgotten in an age of short-termism in which memories and knowledge gained from past actions are so readily dismissed as nothing more than nostalgic yearnings for by-gone eras. It appears that 'the art of forgetting is an asset no less, if no more, important than the art of

memorizing', indeed, 'forgetting rather than learning is the condition of continuous fitness' (Bauman, 1997: 25). Driving this is a 'strategic intent to change the ethos of universities and, more specifically, to harness the activities of academics more directly and explicitly to market forces as a means of raising their contribution to national economic performance' (Prichard and Willmott, 1997: 298).

In general Universities have become the targets of transformation for representing practices and forms of organisational knowledge that are characterised as inefficient, closed, lacking in innovation and defensive. The knowledge they produce is seen by central government – both Thatcherite and New Labour – as in need of revision to be more 'relevant' to the needs of the market leading to questions over the future of higher education provision (see Delanty, 2001). The essence of the private sector, on the other hand, is assumed to be 'its ability to create, transfer, assemble, integrate, and exploit knowledge assets. Knowledge assets underpin competences, and competences in turn underpin the firm's product and service offerings to the market' (Teece, 1998: 75). The idea of 'capturing value' from extant organisational knowledge assets within Universities is, by contrast, significant in its absence. Whilst knowledge transfer does occur, it tends to be a one-way relation in which knowledge informing and arising from practice is subject to modes of control that aim at conformity to expectations born in the shadow of the market. Symptomatic of this trend is the division that research councils make between projects that are 'pure' and those that are 'strategic and applied', whilst 'end-user' involvement in the process and dissemination of research is a core element of project submissions.

Implementation and depoliticisation

Background assumptions regarding the superiority of market-based forms of knowledge translate, as they move down through Universities, into increasing levels of bureaucracy. Whilst this creates anomalies, tensions and contradictions, it also ends up creating de-politicised views of processes and practices. One result, as we have seen, is to bracket a history whose values are rooted in ways of working that were born out of recognition of the limitations of the market. What also arises, however, are spaces of ambivalence. Administrative-technical discourses then appear and these produce rationalisations for organisational existence which ignore the relationship between knowledge and practice at the front-line of educational provision.

One result is to obscure political-allocative issues (concerning the overall volume of budgetary allocation) through the production of narrowly defined objectives and targets. As strategic visions are produced in glossy brochures the processes of implementation produce rationalisations for controlling the practices of those who are assumed to be ineffective, inefficient and resistant to change. Corporate visions translate into targets and objectives as they move through the organisational hierarchy. Individualistic views of people or units within Universities then predominate because they are separated from its history, the context of their actions, as well as the knowledge that informs those actions with colleagues and students (now read 'customers').

One consequence is that the substance and purpose of a lecture is not the subject of deliberation and review, rather the module or course as given by the result of student evaluation questionnaires. The lecturer then responds to such evaluation in terms of future activities and changes that are needed to address those deficiencies raised by the process. What then predominates is a concern to see that the results are processed through a formal committee structure and recorded accordingly. This results from the anticipation of 'audit trails' that are characteristic of quality reviews: the assumption being that the results have been taken seriously and acted upon by virtue of being subject to a particular process. Therefore, it is perfectly possible not to reflect upon the content and purpose of a lecture programme as a learning experience, but instead to be satisfied that it meets specific 'learning outcomes and objectives' and is recorded as such.

None of the above suggests that the monitoring of academic work is not an important and necessary component of quality in which colleagues and students should participate. However, it is to suggest that this modus operandi is representative of a deficient proceduralism that takes the complexities and content of knowledge in relation to the context of its transmission and forces it into a preconceived process without purpose. The overall result is to move Universities away from being problem-solving to being performance organisations (Mintzberg, 1983) that become pre-occupied with matters of presentation (read 'presentism' in terms of being atemporal) and representation.

The displacement of conflict: contexts, boundaries and rationales

Academics often attribute these changes to 'outsiders' who embody a form of understanding that is somehow 'alien' to their own knowledge and experiences (Norton, 2001). Yet it is within the academic community that responses have ranged from enthusiastic endorsement, through a mechanical ritualism that produces no threat to its logics, to rhetorical rejection without effect. For those who embrace this proceduralism it offers opportunities for advancement in the organisational hierarchy. Thus, in terms of understanding the processes that produce these 'technicians of transformation' (May, 1994) it becomes necessary to take account of power as something

that does not 'only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that … traverses and produces things, … induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse' (Foucault, 1980: 119).

If it were just a matter of resisting entirely 'other' practices, the academic community might have been expected to show a more consistently critical response to these organisational transformations. After all, professionals - academics in this case - demarcate knowledge according to whether it belongs to identified persons who possess similar sets of qualifications and experiences. 'Outside' knowledge and its applicability to practice may then be readily dismissed as irrelevant. Clear differences in orientation can be constructed between those who lie within knowledge boundaries and those who remain on the outside. Indeed, the ability to distinguish aspects of knowledge in this way constitutes the difference, for example, between administrative and professional rationales and a market and public sector ethos. The justification for a professional act is that it is in line with and justified by the professional's knowledge base, whereas the justification for an 'administrative act is that it is in line with the organization's rules and regulations, and that it has been approved, directly or by implication - by a superior rank' (Etzioni, 1969: xi). The justification for practices is then embodied in the positions occupied by specific personnel.

The problem with this conceptualisation is that professional and administrative rationales are assumed to reflect two different 'assumptive worlds' (Young, 1977), which - as with the technical-administrative rationale itself - is to fail to take account of the organisational and environmental context of actions. After all, the majority of strategic managers within Universities are those who once were, or seek to remain, professional academics (see Pritchard, 2000). In addition, those who are positioned between strategic management and front-line teaching and research have found themselves enrolled in a process in which they are expected to disseminate the message of change and monitor its success. Occupants of these roles act as 'go-betweens' (Goffman, 1984), linking the front line of academic delivery with strategic management via the collection of information on 'performance'. In the case of the QAA this involves writing departmental 'self assessment documents' with paper trails of supporting documentary evidence, which are then used by external assessors as the basis of their reviews. Nevertheless, prior to this process institutions also require such persons to write these documents for the purpose of internal quality reviews.

In other words, the process not only brackets purpose but is also without end.In the face of these changes there is frequently denial or displacement of conflict, which manifests itself in several ways. First, dissent is made difficult due to the assumed neutrality of performance measures - as if it were possible to find an objective (in the sense of being free from values) standpoint from which to control discretionary knowledge. Second, there is the blurring of knowledge boundaries through mechanisms of control and the creation of new posts in which particular academic qualifications are no longer assumed to be applicable to practice (thus further marginalising alternative viewpoints on that practice). Meanwhile, those persons occupying new management positions are accountable for the implementation of policy according to criteria driven by the assumed irresponsibility of past practices. Administrative-technical organisational knowledge is then embodied in positions within the organisation, thereby blurring the ability to create boundaries between different forms of knowledge and hence effective resistance to transformations.

None of this is to suggest that conflict is absent, or that there is no variation in the resources that different academic communities and types of higher education institution can mobilise in defence of their interests. This apart, however, it is frequently manifested in episodic value-based protests, as opposed to generalised and systematic forms of resistance.

When conflict is apparent it then becomes the target of the same cognitive-instrumental interventions that work to bracket questions of political legitimacy in favour of explanations that pathologise the reasons for conflict. Those academics-turned-managers are symbolically positioned to reflect the new order by challenging outdated beliefs in the old via allusions to their own experiences as academics. What we then find is a blurring of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) expressed as a general recognition of particular skills and knowledge that inform and arise from practice. At a micro level, speaking with authority about past experiences and knowledge gained within practice is then open to challenge by those who were exposed to similar conditions, but now represent new ways of viewing organisational practice.

The very commitment that arises from within practice and provides for self-identifying narratives of professional experience and purpose becomes marginalised in these processes. This is attested to by the constant refrain by internal 'institutional facilitators' in the run up to audits that, regardless of what is felt to be local good practice accumulated over years of experience, if there are no formal policy documents to legitimate such practices they might as well not exist. At this point the gendered components of professional knowledge may also be at their most apparent. Expressions of anger, born of commitment and directed against the consequences and rationale of transformative practices, are readily dismissed as being symptomatic of 'emotional outbursts' that are not 'productive' to the process. Displays of episodic power (May, 1999) are then further individualised and co-participants to these encounters are relieved of the need to consider the reasons why someone expressed such feelings in the first place. The 'why' conditions of practice become bracketed via a concentration on the inappropriateness of behaviour in terms of how it is manifested by the individual concerned.

Overlapping rationales and the denial of context

An ethos of what is regarded as academic autonomy - or 'regulated liberty' as we would prefer (Bourdieu, 2000) - has thus found itself the target of these transformative practices. Whilst this has been interpreted and altered in the process of implementation and wealthier Universities may be more successful than others in ignoring or resisting administrative edicts, it leads to individualised cultures within increasingly bureaucratic environments. Yet caution has to be exercised in turning inward toward the consequences and not outward towards the presuppositions. Organisations in the private sector also exhibit tensions and contradictions because economic activity is bound up with social and political relations.

Despite being known to political scientists and sociologists for some time, this is what the billionaire financier George Soros (1998), Francis Fukayama (1995) and the management writer Charles Handy (1997) have brought to greater public attention. Social relations inform and underpin the limited ideas of rationality that are assumed to inform economic calculations (Bourdieu, 2000; Callon, 1998). To pursue policies based upon unthinking idealisations without an understanding of social context undermines the very relations upon which the distinctiveness of practices are reliant. Yet academics should be aware that there are parallels between administrative-technical representations that ignore the context of working practices and those claims to knowledge found in academic communities. Performance measures represent the absence of context-sensitivity and how this informs practical knowledge. To recognise this context-sensitivity is assumed to translate into a context-dependence thereby reinforcing the assumed source of power of academic discretion that is being targeted in the first place. However, from the point of view of academics in their claims to authority, to admit of the influence of context in their practice would be to lapse into concerns with the social conditions of their activities. Knowledge would then be 'politicised' and claims to distinction via its disinterested pursuit, undermined.

What we see here are overlapping claims between academic knowledge and performance measures. Both fail to recognise that: 'The chances of translating knowledge for action into knowledge in action are immeasurably improved once it is recognized that the probability to realize knowledge is dependent on context specific social, political and economic conditions' (Stehr, 1992: 121). In the pursuit of a false universalism via a mistaken identification of the importance of context sensitivity for the production of practical knowledge, the logics of the professional project and organisational transformation become aligned. The history of the University in terms of its original purpose is then forgotten in a collective 'de-politicized simulation of truth' (Poster, 1990). The struggles of the past in producing a distinctive set of organisational practices in contrast to the logic of the market system then become luxuries rooted in history in the face of the 'necessity' to conform to the present. Academic communities are thus vulnerable to de-skilling and to the historical forgetting that we have suggested undermines the possibility of critique.

The production of organisational information serves as both the justification and interpretation of these new regimes of simulated truth. Criticism of the validity of such means fall upon deaf ears for they question the very pre-suppositions upon which the decision-making process is based. Questions of 'why' become luxuries in face of those who can only see 'how'. Plus, when that fails, there is never a questioning of the whole enterprise. Instead, the whole frenetic process goes in search of yet more measures. Illustrative here is the evolution of the QAA itself, which began as a teaching quality assessment before reinventing its practice in 1998 so as to be 'less bureaucratic and time consuming', only now to undergo radical transformation yet again under the rubric of a 'lighter touch' – that is, to dovetail with institutions' own internal review systems. Yet despite the fact that these changes were motivated by periodic profound questioning of Quality Assurance's various methodologies (to the extent that the QAA's chief executive, John Randall, resigned in August 2001), wider interrogations of the process of auditing itself have not surfaced. When we add to this triumph of these forms of 'how' over 'why', the growing army of those whose role it is either to deploy, prepare for, or implement audits, the result is an even more entrenched prioritisation of abstracted method over issues of purpose.

Summary

Our argument has been that political questions have been neutralised through the projection of the supposed neutrality of an administrative (specifically, auditing) process. This, in turn, is informed by the importation of assumptions derived from the market that public organisations are necessarily inferior. In effect, this is an act of forgetting history and obscuring the value choices that inescapably inform policies and practices. At the same time these projects rely upon a general lack of political articulation and resistance. This is not to suggest that resistance is absent at individual and micro levels, accompanied by the occasional flourish of solidarity in adversity.

Yet resistance is difficult precisely because these transformations depend upon masking their power effects on academics through subverting and remoulding the idea of some sense of purpose for their work – especially in the sense that academics increasingly assess their 'excellence' 'in terms of the rating they achieve rather than the value which they place upon their activity' (Prichard and Willmott, 1997: 304). Insofar as they are successful,

such transformations loosen the anchors that fix meaning, which permits power to flow through Higher Education in a manner that appears to have no nodal points. Power and responsibility then collapse with the presupposition that all are responsible and exercise equal power. Here we witness the introduction of processes that seek to mask their political-allocative consequences through the triumph of method over purpose. This is the practice of administration as de-politicisation that is, at once, the practice of historical forgetting under the mask of the eternal present.

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