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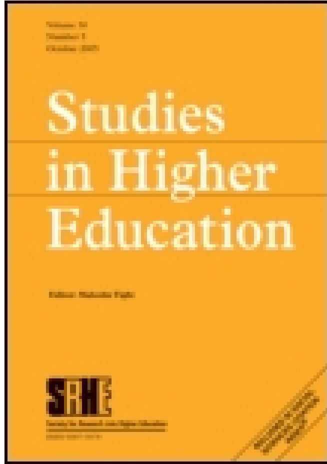

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Department-level Cultures and the Improvement of Learning and Teaching

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ABSTRACT *This article argues that good practice in teaching and learning in the English-speaking world may be compromised by structural changes in the higher education system. The impact of these changes is, however, affected by leadership practices and working cultures at the departmental level. These can, it is argued, assist in the development of 'deeper' teaching and learning practices even in a context which may be seen as unfavourable to them. Rejecting simplistic notions of transformational leadership and organisational cultural engineering, the article identifies activity systems at the local, departmental, level as the central loci of changes in approaches to and recurrent practices in teaching and learning. Desirable change is most likely to be achieved in collective and collaborative ways, which means that change processes are contingent and contextualised, and that outcomes are unpredictable and fuzzy. The data in this article come from in-depth interviews with academics in England and Canada; from one author's previous studies; and from literatures on faculty's work environments in English-speaking countries.*

Introduction

In this article we argue that the ways in which academic staff (faculty) experience their work often inhibit them from taking up what the research consensus suggests are ways to be better teachers. We suggest that improving teaching[1] involves developing systems of work relations, most significantly at the departmental level, the activity system that is the focus of this article. An activity system is a functional subsystem (or holon) of a larger system in which people work together on the tasks which the system was created to manage. In educational contexts, people may be members of several activity systems, but in a higher education institution the academic department or subunit of it is usually the main activity system for most academic staff. This is the central locus of cultural enactment and, importantly, construction in universities which are, inevitably, extremely culturally complex organisations (Sackmann, 1997). We argue that the exhortation to teach better—or to facilitate better learning—will have little impact unless departmental cultures are conducive to better teaching. Likewise, attempts to improve teaching by coercion run the risk of producing compliance cultures, in which there is 'change without change', while simultaneously compounding negative feelings about academic work. The corollary of this argument is to place the analytical spotlight on leadership within departments. Appropriate leadership education for departmental chairs and heads is a key to teaching improvement, a theme that is developed in the last section of this article.

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Our argument rests on two sources of data. One is a summary of international findings about faculty work environments. The second draws on data about the experience of new faculty members, locating it within North American research into their working lives. It will be appreciated, then, that our case rests partly upon data that we have collected and that it is also based on an interpretation of data reported by others in Canada, Australia, Britain and the USA.

The Study of New Academics

Much of the literature discussed here derives from studies of established academic staff. However, we approached the issue by researching the socialisation experiences of new faculty. We reason that new academics have more acute perceptions of the cultural environment they are entering than those for whom sets of values, attitudes and recurrent practices have become taken for granted and hence invisible. Our conclusions echo, draw on, add to, and to some extent reinterpret, data presented in a small number of North American, Australian and English studies (Dunkin, 1990; Boice, 1992; Beaty, 1996; Perry *et al.*, 1996; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996).

We conducted a series of 26 long interviews with 24 appointees in two Canadian and eight English universities in 1997/98. The biggest group came from Education departments, but there were also people from Physics, Deaf Studies, Women's Studies and Engineering. None fitted the stereotype of the 27 year-old with a newly-minted PhD. Our study only examined full-time, or tenure track, appointments. The data comprise transcripts of lightly-structured interviews which we independently analysed with qualitative data analysis software and then discussed. We present our findings in the form of brief quotations that indicate the tenor of our data as well as significant variations (see McCracken, 1988; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Arksey & Knight, 1999). It is important to remember that spontaneously expressed views do not provide a good measure of the number of informants who would agree with a proposition were it presented to them for response. Yet, the similarity in the tenor of our informants' spontaneous responses to those elicited by other methods and described in other international studies (see works cited earlier) gives us some confidence that our findings have the reliability of recognisability.

Our planned study was to have been longer and to have involved a bigger, structured sample of informants. The Canadian investigations were planned to take advantage of an opportunity to have informal conversations with instructional development officers and new faculty in 10 universities and to do long interviews with new academics. The plan was changed when it became apparent that (i) the stories told by informants in England closely resembled those reported in the North American literature, and (ii) the Canadian accounts were also consistent with the literature and with the English experiences. While we saw little point in collecting more of the same, we did have a different interpretation of these findings, which is the theme of this article.

What We Know about Improving Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

There is no shortage of research into better teaching, better evaluation and better learning, albeit usually within a paradigm of individual, cognitive psychology. For example, Terenzini (1998) summarised the literature on learning, noting, amongst other things, that effective learning requires the following: challenge to existing knowledge and beliefs; learner involvement and active participation; time for reflection and consolidation; engagement at a time, place and for a reason which is significant to the learner; and social engagement, an

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opportunity to try out new ideas and language with peers. Similar lists of characteristics have been compiled from reviews of the literature by Chickering & Gamson (1991) and more recently by, Svinicki *et al.* (1996). In the UK the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA)-funded empirically based *Improving Student Learning* project led by Graham Gibbs came to similar conclusions (Gibbs, 1994), identifying students' practices in terms of 'deep' or 'surface' learning.

Such studies show that it is the behaviour of the lecturers and the way that they design courses which facilitates deep learning rather than some essential characteristics of individual students (Ramsden, 1994, p. 21). University lecturers tend to adopt an approach to teaching which may be more, or less, sophisticated: they too can adopt a 'surface' or 'deep' approach to teaching. Surface approaches tend to emphasise the teacher, the content to be taught and the need to 'cover the ground'. Deeper approaches shift the emphasis towards the student and the learning environment, concentrating on the need to motivate, encourage independent learning activity and establish a conducive environment for learning which is now defined in qualitative rather than quantitative ('knowing more') terms. The locus of activity for the teacher shifts from the self and the classroom to the student and to the wider environment as the teacher's conception of teaching changes (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996). Planning moves from the immediate and 'what I will say' to the longer term: 'what the students will do, what they will need and how they will be assessed'. Intermediate positions may stress student interaction. (Dunkin, 1990; Dunkin & Precians, 1992; Samuelowicz & Bain, 1992; Kember & Gow, 1994; Kember, 1997). Matching what we know about learning and what we know about approaches to teaching suggests that what we have termed 'deeper' approaches to teaching are, as the term suggests, more effective. The aim of universities and departments should therefore be to assist academics in moving towards deeper teaching approaches.

However, accounts of practice, such as those of Gaff & Ratcliff (1996) and Menges & Weimer (1996), as well as some students' ratings of their learning experience (Ramsden, 1998) give cause for concern. There is widespread national and international agreement that teaching and learning need to be improved in the ways that have been suggested, but there is clearly a long way to go before aspirations become realities.

The New Higher Education: an inhospitable environment for good teaching and learning?

Many aspects of the changing nature of higher education have militated against a move towards improving practice in learning and teaching. This bundle of changes affecting academic life has already been well researched and so will only be outlined here (for more detail see Everett & Entrekin, 1994; Fisher, 1994; Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995; Currie, 1996; Ducharme, 1996; Karpiak, 1996; 1997; Thorsen, 1996). They include the following.

- Intensification: longer hours of work, more marking to be done, a pressure to publish, and increased expectancy of service. The time, energy and mental space available to improve teaching and learning practices is reduced, particularly in a context of work degradation.
- 'Hard' managerialism. As universities are becoming more managed, faculty can see themselves as less 'professional', less trusted, more called to account, and spending more time on record-keeping and documentation. '... The main problem ... [seems to be] the new administrative tasks and the fragmentation of work time' (Currie, 1996, p. 107. See also Altbach & Lewis, 1996). This parallels analyses of the work of schoolteachers in Britain (Ball, 1997; Gewirtz, 1997; Menter *et al.*, 1997). The associated discourse of

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'delivering' the curriculum, increasingly in bite-sized modules, militates against more innovative teaching and learning practices (Trowler, 1998).

- A loss of collegiality. This has three forms. First, there is no time to socialise. Secondly, people spend less time in the university because they get interrupted there, which disturbs their pressured writing schedule. Thirdly, 'hard' managerialism does not lend itself to collegiality, only to 'contrived collegiality' (Hargreaves, 1994). The opportunity to share and discuss good practice and problems in teaching and learning is increasingly lost.
- Greedy institutions. This might be summarised by saying that institutions have become 'greedy', asking for more without caring sufficiently for the humans who work in it. That can be particularly the case for women academics (Caplan, 1994; The Chilly Collective, 1995) and for those from minority groups who can get called upon to do a disproportionate amount of service work (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). Tensions between work and private life can become acute (André & Frost, 1997). Both alienation (Everett & Entrekin, 1994) and stress, which is high amongst faculty studied in Britain, New Zealand and Australia (Fisher, 1994; Currie, 1996), can result.
- Ageing, malaise and marginality. While there are certainly mid-career professors with a vitality for teaching (Walker & Quinn, 1996; André & Frost, 1997), others, with age, feel malaise ('I'm not as good as I was'), marginality ('on the periphery; not part of the big picture') (Karpiak, 1997, p. 28), and that they work in a 'cold, fragmented environment, "a wilderness" in which "the human element seems to be missing" ' (Karpiak, 1996, p. 60). Reduced self-esteem and self-confidence reduce the capacity to take risks and innovate.

This negative picture should not be exaggerated though. Altbach & Lewis present substantial evidence from 14 countries which suggests that 'the vicissitudes experienced by the profession have been considerable, the professoriate is by no means demoralised. In all but three countries 60 percent or more agree that this is an especially creative and productive time in their fields' (1996, p. 48). An ethnographic study of an English university revealed that underlying what was a worsening situation in many respects was a significant residue of autonomy, work enrichment and development (Trowler, 1998). Structural changes in the workplace do not alone determine how people feel about or respond to changes (Trowler & Knight, 1999). Human agency means that there is choice and that actions can be taken to maximise work satisfaction in the face of structural changes. The university department, or subunits of it, as an activity system is the primary location of the operation of agency. Blackburn & Lawrence (1995) have already shown that academics' research productivity is conditioned by the characteristics of the department in which they work and Ramsden (1998) argues that the same is true of teaching effectiveness.

We argue, then, that the practice of teaching and learning is amenable to change in local contexts, even in a generally deteriorating environment. Lave and colleagues (Chaiklin & Lave, 1993) have demonstrated the situated character of knowing, doing and learning and this has been illustrated in a number of professional contexts (Gherardi *et al.*, 1998; Säljö & Wyndhamn, 1993), though not in university settings. We concur that an understanding of context as situated activity implies that social structures have a non-determinate effect. 'Learning in practice' is always contextualised: any particular action is socially constituted, given meaning in and giving it to socially and historically generated systems of activity. Because meaning has a relational character, generated in the interaction between agents and activity systems, the 'same' behaviour in different locales can take on very different significance (Lave, 1993, p. 18) and the notion of 'transferable skill', including teaching skills, becomes a problematic one. Contextualised meanings are attributed to subjects,

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objects and instruments of practice which, on the face of it, appear the same in different locales but in hermeneutic terms are not.

This has extremely important implications for professional activity and its management. The implications of a constructivist approach for the nature of leadership in academic departments considered as activity systems is of central interest in this article. Ramsden (1998) sums up a key theme:

> There is evidence that the environment of academic departments—including their leadership—influences the quality of teaching and learning in universities … Again, the key factor in the equation is the staff member's perception of the context of academic work. (p. 63)

We now turn, then, to the ways in which the new academics we studied perceived the contexts of their work. We should stress the compatibility of what is said by these new academics with those studied in several North American studies, including the ongoing 'Heeding New Voices' study (Rice, 1996). However, our analysis and interpretation differs in important respects from many of these studies.

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New Academics' Perceptions of Their Work Contexts

1. Freedom, Isolation and Collegiality

The freedom and opportunities that academic life still affords were welcomed:

> You can be your own manager, you have more freedom. You can work at your own pace. (Interviewee 12: female, Education, English unchartered university)

The obverse of freedom was isolation. The very architecture of these colleagues' working space, with its cell-like rooms and lack of communal space, symbolised both freedom and isolation. While the opportunities were celebrated, the isolation was keenly felt, especially as most of our sample had worked outside higher education and were used to less individualistic work environments.

> Well, you could turn up here and sit in this office and nobody would know whether you're alive or dead. You could be dead actually … the cleaner would come and move you out … For an awful lot of the rest of the time I actually haven't known whether or not I'm doing the right thing. (Interviewee 21: male, Education, English chartered university)

2. Uncertainty, Goal Fuzziness and Role Conflict

Multiple roles and multiple, usually tacit, expectations, allied to a lack of feedback from departmental managers, bred uncertainty and unease:

> I get more stressed out about things than I used to [when working in industry]. I think that the reason for that is partly because I don't feel completely confident about knowing how to do things that I do know … In other jobs I've had there were mainly three threads and now there's probably five threads. (Interviewee 6: female, Engineering, English chartered university)

> from the point of view of a new member of staff there are insecurities. On top of that you have 'Am I doing it to a good enough quality?' None of [these] things are easy

> to pin down. In the early days, I went through a crisis of confidence. (Interviewee 21: male, Education, English chartered university)

3. Teaching

Our sample was probably atypical in that only two had no teaching experience, though as we noted earlier, the learning derived from such experience is rarely directly transferable to new contexts:

> I don't think that in terms of teaching I got any help—no that's not right, I got some notes from someone who taught the course before, I got some assignments. (Interviewee 15: female, Engineering, Canadian university)

> you were just given the course title and that was it! (Interviewee 3: female, Education, English unchartered university)

> so teaching at the moment is much more of a strain in this job than has been previously. The demands are higher, and the student dissatisfaction greater. There's much more of a sense that they are 'paying' for their education and they want it delivered as a consumable item in a very neat package ... I'm becoming less committed to [teaching] in a sense that it doesn't pay the dividends that it should. It's getting away from my research. (Interviewee 2: female, Women's Studies, English chartered university)

Informants were presented with a set of four possible goals of teaching: to develop content mastery; to promote an understanding of subject principles and concepts; to foster 'transferable skills'; and to promote personal qualities. Most chose just one or two of these four, but they rarely included 'content mastery' in those one or two aims. Responses were not associated with the respondent's disciplinary or departmental context. In other words, the tendency was to choose the more difficult teaching aims, ones that could be associated with attempts to encourage student understandings, and ones that have an impact on the student that goes beyond the subject alone. Yet, although this pattern fits well with what we know about good teaching and learning, the quotations suggest that these people found it hard, in practice, to teach as they would wish. And one factor in that was, again, isolation. Another was the quality of departmental management.

4. Service

All were expected to do some administrative or service work, with the native American woman informant confirming Tierney & Bensimon's observation (1996) that such women and people from minority groups faced particularly high demands for service on committees. Service, like teaching, was a fixed commitment and one that could expand in proportion to the academic's level of conscientiousness.

> [There's] just me [as personal tutor for the First Year]. So I've inducted them all and now I'm just waiting for the knocks to start on the door. I'm allowed a hundred hours now but I've used that up already typing up registers and organising induction. (Interviewee 3: female, Education, English unchartered university)

> The admin thing has consumed me since I got here ... I've just found it's taken up every minute so both teaching and research have suffered ... Admin seems to be

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> something which grows into as much space as you can give it. (Interviewee 13: male, Education, English chartered university)

5. Research

Although the focus of this article is on faculty's teaching activities, they are under considerable pressure to do research. That can be a source of stress and command attention that might otherwise have been directed towards teaching improvement:

> I do need to get down to the writing, but it's not easy and I'm not finding, it's not flowing when I sit down with paper: I've still got a desk covered with heaps and heaps of paper and I still don't know how to file them yet, other than in the bin. (Interviewee 21: male, Education, English chartered university)

> There is probably much less support in the research area [than in teaching], which is very much down to you to get on with it … I think that within the department we haven't really got a research focus … I think that for a new academic starting out on research you do need some support whereas I don't think that we've got those mechanisms yet. (Interviewee 9, male, Engineering, English chartered university).

6. Overall Workload

Although all reported heavy workloads, they were all coping and most said that in many ways they were enjoying it. It is not clear how long the juggling act could be sustained.

> The hard thing about it is that it is really all-consuming. My work and my hobby have fused … so that I don't get any breaks *per se* … that's tremendous and I really want to do it, and I really don't want to do anything else but it's very wearing on me and it's hard on me in many demands and the way that it manifests itself on me is physically (Interviewee 11: male, Education, Canadian university)

> I've learned how to juggle 15 balls, and the thing is that on the table over there, there is still another 20 balls (Interviewee 17: minority ethnic group female, Education, Canadian university)

> I'm already 101 hours over my normal timetable since September. That's on top of my 37 hours a week. (Interviewee 19: female, Education, English unchartered university, February).

Thorsen (1996) has argued that stress in academic life comes not from the work tasks themselves as much as from the lack of time in which to complete them. Informants' comments on doing research and on overall workload tend to support her analysis.

7. Home and Work

Informants' work took a great deal of time, involved role conflict, often produced stress, left them feeling isolated and bereft of a supportive departmental community. There was a positive side as well, but the negative side is prominent enough to raise questions about the impact of work upon out-of-work life. Few of these faculty were able to defend out-of-work space as in this case:

> it's not a culture she [my wife] is unfamiliar with, so she understands where I am

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> coming from, and she is also very adamant about in some cases keeping the job side [in perspective] ... She'll say 'enough is enough' and that's good because I tune in and play with my kids. I refuse to let anything associated with these job[s] deter my life with my children and my wife. And I simply won't allow it to happen, I'll leave [this] job [rather than let that happen] ... because I'm totally confident of being able to do well elsewhere. (Interviewee 16: male, Education, Canadian university)

More common comments were:

> I'm engrossed in developing some course or another in the day and then engrossed in marking some other course, similar course in the evening. I feel that it's narrowed me too much. (Interviewee 6: female, Engineering, English chartered university)

> It's not a job that you can go home, switch off, sit in front of the telly or go down the pub or whatever. You're always thinking 'I should be doing some work'. Even things like reading a novel is a dreadful thing to do because I could be reading something for my work ... in terms of personal life it's a very time consuming job both in physical time and emotional time which is maybe one thing that I hadn't fully recognised when I came here. I think it's been hard trying to juggle home and family and work responsibilities (Interviewee 10: male, Education, English chartered university)

> After the tape had finished, there was discussion of addictive work behaviour, an account of the way that work has taken over to the extent that it has been impossible to maintain a personal relationship, although this has been true in past jobs as well. (field notes after interview 17: minority ethnic group female, Education, Canadian university)

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8. Departmental Management

It has been reported that faculty have a strong allegiance to their discipline, which often outweighs their loyalty to the university (Sykes, 1988; Becher, 1989; Altbach & Lewis, 1996). That may well be the case, but these informants drew attention to the fragmented nature of their disciplines, which could mean that they could be quite isolated in their department:

> there are divisions ... It's very difficult to talk of [this subject area] as ... It's quite strange ... to define what [this subject area] actually is. I'm sure that if you asked anybody in [this subject area] they would come up with something completely different because it does cover such a wide range of areas, basically anything that ... challenges traditional mainstream knowledge. (Interviewee 10: male, Education, English chartered university)

> For instance, the people here come from the telecommunications end, that's their background and then there are other people who are more what I would call the standard IT end, the computing end of things. They don't really clash because they don't really meet too much in the middle. (Interviewee 6: female, Engineering, English chartered university)

The influence of the Dean or Head of Department was deeply felt:

> I could see that [my priorities] might shift ... if I moved into an area and the Department or Dean said to me, 'You're here to write books' ... Obviously, then I would have different views of [my priorities], I'd concentrate on it [research] ... and

> I would do research in the sense that I would be pumping out, you know, highly technical books focused on the nature and breadth of critical thinking, rather than how can I integrate this into … a broad range of various teaching areas, such as reading or whatever. (Interviewee 16: male, Education, Canadian university)

However, that influence did not usually extend to promoting shared cultures, teams and collegiality:

> I think that the biggest thing is that you don't get a great deal of thanks. That's probably the biggest difference in industry … I think that in academia we don't say 'thank you' to people very often. So, you can very easily become disillusioned and that probably is my greatest personal criticism of the organisation, is that I see people around me who I think are not being made the most of … I think that we could do more collectively. (Interviewee 9: male, Engineering, English chartered university)

> there were serious difficulties in getting someone to be head of the department because it doesn't pay academically to be the head … there's no training for it. There's no thanks for it and it's low status. (Interviewee 2: female, Women's Studies, English chartered university)

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'Transformational Leadership' and its Alternatives: facilitating change in desired directions

Clearly the picture we get from our 'culturally naive' respondents is one which is generally counterproductive in terms of realising good teaching and learning practices outlined earlier. The structures operating on these respondents militate against moving to 'deep' teaching practices. With Giddens, we define structures in terms of the properties which lend coherence and relative permanence to social practices in different times and locales, seeing them having the characteristics of rules and resources, the former consisting of normative elements and codes of signification and the latter comprising both authoritative and allocative aspects (Giddens, 1984: pp. xxxi, 17). The pressure to give research precedence over teaching, the diminution in resources, the codes of signification associated with the teaching effort and the unintended as well as the intended consequences of many other features of the work context militate against the teaching and learning practices we have identified as beneficial.

However, as we have indicated, considering university departments and their subunits as activity systems suggests that structures are not wholly determinant and there is room for agency here. By this we do not mean simple-minded attempts to 'change the culture' of departments in ways suggested (for whole organisations) by cultural managerialist approaches (Pollitt, 1993) and as articulated in the work of Beckhard & Pritchard (1992) for example. A search for the correct levers to pull so that recurrent practices, values, attitudes and taken-for-granted knowledge will invariably be changed is ethically dubious (because the imposition of values violates individual autonomy and perhaps academic freedom), impractical (because universities are not tightly-coupled systems, which these change attempts assume) and even counter-productive (because imposed change in universities tends to produce resistance). The danger in such a corporate culturist project (Willmott, 1993) is of suppressing the healthy diversity of cultural manifestations in the university and leading to an active backstage and under-the-stage culture of cynicism and resistance. Nor are we convinced of the universal applicability of related models of 'transformational leadership' developed by Seltzer & Bass (1990) among others and based upon the heroic figure of a

(male) charismatic visionary brimming over with leadership qualities (self-confidence, energy, initiative) and whom others are proud to follow. Apart from the fact that such figures may be thin on the ground in university contexts, there are a number of related problems both with this as a desirable model and one which is actually well founded empirically (Alvesson, 1996).

Ramsden (1998) is one proponent of the model of transformational leadership as the route to better teaching and learning in university departments. While his conceptualisation of that term somewhat de-emphasises the inspirational hero and places more stress than many other writers on negotiation, dialogue and trust, his summary of specific ways in which academic leaders can improve the standard of teaching (pp. 172–174) is written from the perspective of the leader and pays scant attention to how such measures will be received by colleagues in the department, in other words to the pre-existent cultural characteristics of specific activity systems.

Let us give an example to illustrate. Ramsden suggests that departmental leaders establish a student liaison forum where students can meet staff over lunch to canvass ideas and creative options for better teaching and learning. Such an event would be a desirable effect, rather than an achievable cause, of departmental change. In practice, in the departments most in need of change such a proposal would be met with a mixture of resistance, avoidance, coping or reconstructing strategies related to staff and students' interpretation and reception of such an idea and its underpinning assumptions. The same is true of most of the rest of Ramsden's proposals, such as forming groups of staff interested in working through key texts on teaching during their lunchtimes or encouraging peer observation of teaching by being the first to be observed.

By the same token we question the likely beneficial effects of 'transactional leadership' which in some ways complements the injunctions of the theory of transformational leadership. Here there is the provision of clear expectations and rewards in exchange for effort and loyalty (Ramsden, 1998, p. 67): a contract relationship between leader and staff is established. While both approaches are rooted in managerialist ideology, transactional leadership is both more simplistic and more clearly displays its origins in a neo-Taylorist understanding of motivations and associated cultural blindness. The obverse of rewarding specific performances is that what is not rewarded does not get done, so that creativity and initiative can be stunted.

In practice, though, academics do not tend to operate on the basis of the personal 'profitability' (Levine, 1980) of action alone. Though the profitability of an innovation is one factor conditioning their response to it, this is more likely to be a profitability for those involved in the activity system as a whole rather than the individual. More important, though, is the fact that the reception, perception and application in recurrent practices of managed change, including change in teaching and learning practices, passes through cultural filters and personal contexts of the people whose practices it is designed to affect:

> … one of the basic reasons why planning fails is that the planners or decision makers of change are unaware of the situations that potential implementers are facing. They introduce changes without providing a means to identify and confront the situational constraints and without attempting to understand the values, ideas and experiences of those who are essential for implementing any changes. (Fullan, 1991, p. 96)

Instead of transformational and transactional leadership we suggest that an appropriate model to follow is what we call interactional leadership: one based on what might be described as directed collegiality. This proposes that it is the role of departmental leaders to act in a way that is sensitised to current practices, discourses and meaning construction in

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their departments. This is done with a view to establishing a climate of negotiation based on trust oriented to as well as growing from a developing understanding of the shape of departmental goals. Cultural sensitivity is the first step to appreciating workable strategies to foster an environment in which teaching, learning and the needs and interests of students are given greater priority.

As Birnbaum puts it in his book on US university presidents, 'good leaders are seen as good listeners, responsive to others, and committed to the institution and integrated into its culture' (1992, p. 121.) Again, 'leadership shifts from command and control to creating a climate of trust and shared understanding. Companies must focus on creating a supportive culture and enhancing the ability of people to self-organize' (Allee, 1997, p. 98.) This 'soft' leadership is characterised by a concern for teamwork, for collegiality and networking, by an emphasis on organisational learning, and hence, as a result of all of these on personal development as a normal, natural part of the working environment. Birnbaum argues that the president who stops being people-centred, listening and 'managing by wandering around', in short, being an interactive leader, becomes a less successful president.

Creating an environment in which lecturers feel that they have control over their teaching, that teaching is valued and that they have room to take chances, has been found to assist in the move towards a student-focused approach which leads them towards deep learning and significant conceptual change. Yet how this is done will vary from context to context. Case studies of actual innovations such as the Rand Change Agent Study (1974–78) have confirmed that the need to achieve mutual adaptation of the innovation and the context is one important component of successful innovations.

We suggest that learning organisations require learning managers: managers who are reflective practitioners and who apply their analytical skills to the important activity systems with which they are engaged, and develop with other staff appropriate, contextualised, strategies for change. Fullan (1993) reminds us that change is a journey, not a blueprint. Journeys are usually engaged in with a specific destination in mind, but the one reached may be significantly different from that originally envisaged and there are usually as many reasons for going as there are travellers.

However it is important to remember that leadership is, at its heart, full of apparent contradictions. The leader must listen and be responsive but at the same time must lead. The ideal, as Senge (1992), Fullan (1993) and others point out is to develop a *shared* vision of change achieved through dialogue, careful listening and compromise. As Weick (1995) has observed in his analysis of organisational sense-making, aims are often elucidated *after* action, which suggests that the progress of change is more likely to be successful when it follows the path of 'ready, fire, aim' rather than the more usual 'ready, aim, fire' (Fullan, 1993, p. 31).

It is important to recognise some potential dangers in interactional leadership. The first is that claims rather outstrip empirical work. While the literature emphasises the importance of cultural leadership, of which transformational leadership is an example, structures and routines may be more significant in some cases. A rare study that sheds light upon this concluded that effective departments in English secondary schools might be characterised by their cultures or by their structures and routines (Harris *et al.*, 1997). More research is needed in a variety of settings. Secondly, although substantial claims have been made for collegiality (see Hargreaves, 1995, for a view of the benefits in schools), the claims may be exaggerated or not readily achievable (Bush, 1997). Just as with primary school children expected to work in groups (Galton & Williamson, 1992), the rhetoric may outstrip the reality, both for reasons of individual psychology (some people are not at ease in collaborative settings) and for organisational reasons (daily practices are at variance with the rhetoric). Thirdly, there is the argument that this is tantamount to the 'colonisation of the affective

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domain', to propagating self-surveillance, and to engineering the situation where people collude in working relationships that are not in their own best interests (Ball, 1997; Prichard & Willmott, 1997). Yet, while it cannot be said that interactional leadership is a panacea for unwelcome structural changes, the emphasis on collegiality and consultation reduces isolation and allows for mutual support and reinforcement.

A minority of our informants spontaneously commended departmental management:

> [This] university is very supportive in the course production area. This course team concept … we are very critical of each others' work, we spend a lot of time giving critical and positive feedback.' (Interviewee 9: male, Engineering, English chartered university).

> [The Dean] would call and say 'There's another young couple here, the woman has just started teaching psychology and the husband is a teacher as well, you might want to talk with them'. So we became friends. The Dean had us over for dinner a few times. He talks with us, checking us out on how we are moving in. Also he'd stop by and 'say how is it going?' He would help with any questions. He would ask his secretary to make sure that I had whatever materials that I really needed, like that kind of thing. That made it really rewarding, really welcoming: just really thoughtful. And then while I was getting set up, any faculty that were around would come in and introduce themselves and talk with me. They would give you their perspective and that was helpful: to hear other opinions and feel like you are being …, like you're starting to settle here and getting information and people were just so nice.
> (Interviewee 18: male, Teacher Education, Canadian university).

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Despite the reservations we have noted about interactional leadership, we suggest that where people work collaboratively, for example on planning a new degree programme (and programme-wide thinking now looms larger in British policy—National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE] 1997), the opportunities for organisational and personal learning are multiplied. Mentoring programmes, staff development courses and appraisal will continue to have a part in academics' professional learning. But where departmental members work together on teaching improvement, programme design, assessment review, or on finding ways of encouraging learner autonomy, then contextualised professional learning will occur: such social interaction is its natural and normal locus (Wergin, 1994). (This theme is developed with reference to secondary school teachers' professional learning in McCulloch *et al.*, 2000.)

Conclusions and Implications

Clearly little can be done at the ground level to alter the structural changes that cause concern amongst established academics and which were described in the studies reported on pp. 71–73 above. However, leaders, especially department heads, can mitigate some of the effects of these changes on students and even promote the improvement of teaching and learning practices and outcomes. Doing nothing is hardly a good long-term plan as governments and other stakeholders continue to expect more from higher education, often at a reduced cost per student. Nor is it fruitful to depend upon crude solutions founded in managerialist ideology, whose limitations are such that the best outcome

is that an increasingly-corroded workforce might appear to change—but without actually changing.

Our argument has been that cultural change for the better can occur when the focus of leadership attention is at the level of the natural activity system of universities: the department or a subunit of it. However, cultural change has to be collaborative and is therefore unpredictable. Managers work in rather than on cultural contexts and their most important skills revolve around perceptiveness towards and analysis of these contexts.

Plainly, if better departmental leadership is to be seen as the key to improving approaches to teaching and student learning by facilitating collaboration, then the role of the head, or chair, of department needs reworking and this will require improved leadership and management training for department heads. At present, such training as exists is widely limited to legal matters, organisational procedures and doing the budget. New approaches to training require new thinking in staff and educational development units, which will also have much more to do in supporting faculty working on teams to address current problems.

The final point we wish to make is to draw attention to the parallels with other sectors of education with further education and secondary schools, where similar stories could be told. Indeed there are significant sectoral differences, but the parallels are also striking. Given the increasing school effectiveness researchers' interest in departmental effects (Harris *et al.*, 1997), it may be that 'middle management' in education in the shape of departmental leadership is a research topic whose time has come.

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NOTES

[1] Teaching is taken to be all the planned arrangements to bring about desired learning goals. It is therefore much more than classroom performance. It includes, for example, insightful planning, the creation of learning activities, and the provision of assessment activities that are fit for the intended learning outcomes.

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