A framework for an arts-based inquiry into the institutional culture of The University

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Abstract

The use of the arts in management is becoming a more widely established practice: “The MFA is the new MBA” (Pink, 2004: 21). The role of the arts in understanding organizations is increasingly recognised. The aesthetics of organization has been applied to all kinds of organizations, including universities. In this paper the author, who teaches a post-graduate course in using the arts to understand organizational change, explores the use of the arts in approaching institutional culture, specifically that of The University.

Introduction

The role of the arts in understanding organizations is increasingly recognised. The aesthetics of organization has been applied to all kinds of organizations, including universities. In this paper the author explores the use of the arts in institutional inquiry, specifically that of The University. First the University as an institution is considered, and then the question of how to research it. Then the usefulness of the arts is examined, with a view to creating a theoretical framework for an arts-based inquiry into institutional culture.

The University

Universities are organizations, but they also belong to that set of organizations that have an institutional role in societies. The University is an institution and although universities are increasingly differentiated as organizations, as institutions they continue to share many features.

The distinction between university as organization and university as institution is arguable and the case for its theoretical value must still be made. This paper is partly concerned with making that case. It explores what the university is and what it represents; what is happening to it and the norms and aspirations that it embodies. Later, and perhaps more importantly, it explores ways in which researchers may investigate how people experience it.

Never a pure idea

There are many studies of the idea of higher education and the university, and they are appearing with increasing frequency (see for example the SHRE and Open University Press imprint alone). Although it is worthwhile to consider other traditions (cf Šanthi-Devi 1995), few of them do so, and even within the Western tradition relatively few consider the early history of the idea. It is sobering to realize just how longstanding the issues facing universities are. Plato’s Academy was, according to Pedersen (1997:12) ‘the first example in Antiquity of an institution with an education at once socially useful and generally humane as its aim’. It is often considered the world’s first university. But its strength - the acumen and consistency with which fundamental problems of science and humanity were debated - was its weakness. It needed, according to Pedersen, the supplementation it got with Aristotle’s Lykeion.

Where Plato had sought to educate by teaching, Aristotle wished to train by research. He also saw as his aim the development of good and harmonious members of society, but the methods were different. The relevant subjects are pursued in Aristotle’s view not only through theoretical reflection on basic problems of philosophy, but also by direct experience through exploration of
both natural phenomena and the structure of society. So he equipped his school as a real research institution with ordered collections of scientific material. (Pedersen, page 13.)

The early medieval universities from the start were sites of battles between town and gown. Chancellors, bishops, popes, kings, towns, students and teachers were all stakeholders fighting for influence through the university. Bologna came into being through law students fighting exploitative rents, in Paris, theology teachers had to contend with town objections to riotous students, other universities had to balance the interests of towns fighting against income disruptions whilst battling competition between itinerant teachers. Kings needed jurists to fight the church’s canonists, the Church itself needed to fight false doctrines. The university has never been a pure idea.

Centuries after Aquinas, Cardinal Newman ([1853] 1976) took up the tension between moral excellence and rational intelligence in his struggle to reconcile the competing demands of cultivating virtue and accepting knowledge of the profane. According to John Stuart Mill (1979:134), “What professionals ... should carry away with them from a university is not professional knowledge but that which should direct the use of their professional knowledge”. This is the kind of education that most people would associate with university education. However, Mill’s injunction, which is part of a strong tradition in thinking about higher education, is not quite clear. What is ‘that’ which should direct the use of professional knowledge? Class-interests? Guild interests? Or is it an overarching cognitive framework? And how is ‘that’ knowledge to be distinguished from professional knowledge? The idea is played out in the “great books debate” (Carnochan 1993:79-87) and the notion of a foundation curriculum in Western Civilization in universities in the United States.

The social role of universities

As a lecturer in my university, my job description contains the requirement to act as a ‘social conscience and critic of society’. This may sound quite inviting, but our discussion so far indicates, it bears examination. In his introduction to Chalk Lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University, the editor, Randy Martin (1998:4), points out that fiscal constraint for much of the citizenry is being twinned with newfound freedom of movement for financial instruments. In this way universities are being brought to heel under the guise of economic restraint, and the individual becomes the site of cultural accumulation, eventually expressed as the power to get to the top of the food chain. This is supposed to lead to a more secure society. But when political and economic security become amalgamated, it curtails civilian opposition and the university is no longer the holdout against economic and cultural rationalization.

A research question

So how should we investigate such a phenomenon? Clearly the physical attributes and numerical data pertaining to any university, and to the idea of the university, are the least important aspect of the entity. Like other organizations or institutions of society, such as prisons, hospitals, local authorities the important questions revolve around what the institution means, what it feels like, what its value is, and so on. We need to consider forms of inquiry that get under and behind what is apparent.

This kind of research question is ideally suited to an arts-based framework. The question of how people experience the university in terms of its role as an institution in society requires access to those many levels of human experience that are usually placed outside the framework of rational assumptions that produce standard research methodologies. The arts, precisely by involving sensibilities to colour, form, texture, sound, movement and so on, and by being intensely metaphorical, provide an appropriate framework for inquiry.

Not surprisingly the use of the arts in management learning is not new (Gibb, 2004; Fairfield & London, 2003; Mallinger & Rossy, 2003; Nissley, 2002; Zietsma, 2002). Management is understood variously (and contested) as an art, craft, science, and social practice. More recently, the idea of organizational aesthetics and the art of strategy, and the classification of management as a design science have arisen, as well as the use of the arts in organizational research (Humphreys, Brown, & Hatch, 2003; Reeves, Duncan, & Ginter, 2001; Buchanan, 2001). The use of the arts in management is becoming a more widely established practice:
“The MFA is the new MBA” (Pink, 2004: 21). Indeed one might explore the arts in any educational practice (Green 1995; Eisner, 2002). Art is the pre-eminent form of metaphor and the use of metaphor as a cognitive and heuristic device to help researchers see phenomena differently and recognize distinctions hitherto inconceivable can be found in the many works of Karl Weick, and others such as Cornelissen (2004), Morgan (1980, 1983) Tsoukas (1991), and Danziger (1990).

There is another reason, particular to universities, for invoking art as a mode of inquiry. In the current condition of education, especially higher education, the role of knowledge, indeed the very idea of knowledge, is unstable. ‘The being of’ an academic, the texture of the daily life of academics, has been historically formed by what is increasingly considered an unstable material – knowledge. This invites questions of knowledge relative to being. What material is on hand to create the fabric (or fabricate the texture) of my being? Barnett (2004: 71) has pointed out the limits of academic knowledge “both in its lack of reflexivity and its inability fully to supply the epistemologies that the wider world of fast globalisation requires. More importantly, in such a world – of unpredictability and challengeability – knowledge is being supplanted by being as the key term for the university”. He goes on to ask, in the context of the university, how are we to live personally and collectively with uncertainty, and how are we to understand research and teaching as intentional acts? It is this difficulty that gives rise to the ‘proliferation of genres’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998) and concepts such as ‘methodologies of the heart’ (Pelias, 2004), ‘fabrications’ (Ball, 2003) and creative non-fiction (Gutkind, 2005).

The use of art

Notwithstanding the progress and inventions in research methodologies and the changes in art over the last century, the effort of the art philosopher Herbert Read to clarify Plato’s thesis that art should be the basis of education is still apposite. Read (1958:8) convincingly argues that the general purpose of education is to foster the growth of what is individual in each human being, at the same time harmonizing the individuality thus educed with the organic unity of the social groups to which the individual belongs’ and that in this process aesthetic education is fundamental. Read goes on to describe a schema (which corresponds to those of other eminent educators) of art related to human activity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual education</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plastic education</td>
<td>touch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Musical education</td>
<td>ear</td>
<td>{music}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinetic education</td>
<td>muscles</td>
<td>{dance}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal education</td>
<td>speech</td>
<td>{poetry and drama}</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constructive education</td>
<td>thought</td>
<td>{craft}</td>
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These in turn may be related to mental processes as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design</th>
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<th>sensation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Music and dance</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>intuition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poetry and drama</td>
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<td>feeling</td>
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<td>Craft</td>
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The fundamental human capacities revolve around perception, imagination and expression and this respect Read anticipated many current arguments claiming that art and science are sometimes falsely and inaccurately distinguished. These fundamental human capacities can be easily related to the task of managers and organizational analysts. We now consider how specific art forms can enhance understanding, specifically, of organizational change.

Illustration

The use of modelling in organizational theory is widespread. The task here is to visualise one’s organizational experience to “picture things”. We pursue the implicit metaphor in phrases such as “What is
your perspective?” “What is your point of view?” “How do you see it?” “What is your vision?” “Let’s develop a scenario.” Understanding the nature of pictures or two-dimensional representations becomes important. We may then go further to ask; What is a model? Is it the same as an illustration? How so, or how not so? How do models or illustrations or pictures help us understand organisational change? To what extent can a theory be explained through pictures? What are the implications of using analogical or digital representations?

Drama

Organizational change is inevitably about conflict. Drama is the ancient art of exploring human conflict, which is explored through the action, characters, language and narrative of the story. This is why narrative or discourse analysis is increasingly popular in organizational studies.

In a sense, all organizational activity is driven by the intentional actions of performers. In performance the actor serves as a medium of change or transformation. It is through the actor’s emotion, physical language and force of presence that the audience or organizational members come to believe in the story that is being played out. This creative dynamic is full of tensions: the actor must be both relaxed and alert, he/she must act powerfully, but at the same time, be receptive and vulnerable, he/she must be immersed in the events of the story, yet able to stand back and achieve an overview. There are strong parallels between business leadership and theatrical performance.

Sculpture

The question “What shape are you in?” is richly ambiguous. A friend who is an experienced organisational consultant came to New Zealand from Africa years ago. He described how he struggled to “get into” organisations here. “Everything here is soft and cloudy and rounded and shape-shifting, there are no hard edges and starkness. People don’t make decisions in the same way here.” He was talking about the link between perception, imagination and expression. We live and organise on the land. What we do is grounded on this landscape. This landscape comes towards us all day, every day. It eventually lives inside us. We also have an inner world that we impress upon this landscape. We leave our mark. Our inner selves and outer landscape, insofar as we can distinguish them, are in a constant state of mutual recognition and denial. This holds, whether we speak of natural landscape, organizational landscape, gardens, buildings, or office.

There is a growing literature around the aesthetics and artefacts of organisation (Gagliardi, 1996; Strati, 2005, Taylor, 2005). We are learning to recognise what is there. How it got there and how it got to be what it is, continues to be a source of mystery. Of course it does. The creative process, conscious and unconscious, individual and collective, has fascinated cultures for millennia. It is often a physical and non-verbal, non-cognitive process. Hence it is also intimately bound up with metaphor.

Poetry

Write poetry about work and organisations! Poems about organisational change! You must joking? Well no, not really, there are poems about work, but is there anything wrong with joking anyway?

Jokes rely on metaphor. Some people argue that language IS metaphor. Others argue that an organisational is essentially a process of communication, primarily linguistic, although it is also artifactual. The central argument for a poetic of organisation and change is that the more we play with language the more we are able to access normally hidden depths of meanings and create new meanings.

This argument can be developed and illustrated in a quite straightforward way (Grisoni, 2006) or be embedded in sophisticated philosophical issues (Linstead, 2000). The argument revolves around understanding a distinction between and the relationship between the rational and the irrational and the explicit and the tacit.
Music

According to Frank Zappa, ‘Without deviation, progress is not possible’. All aspects of the change management process provide people with opportunities to take that change in specific directions. How those opportunities are created, adopted and realised can be equated to a particular genre of music, some more obvious than others; Classical, Jazz and Rock for example. For example, John Bonham, drummer with Led Zeppelin, always played slightly behind the beat. This is considered to be one of the key features that gave their music a much greater dynamic. (Modern rhythm machines allow programmers to simulate this timing.)

Conclusion

This paper is the first step towards developing a theoretical justification for the arts as an appropriate framework for inquiry into institutional culture, and suggests what such a framework might comprise. The author draws on experience in visualisation, drama, sculpture, poetry and music.

References


