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The university as a learning organization... Are we there?

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The learning organization concept – key ideas

- Point of departure: Why are some organizations resilient over time, and why do some organizations die?

- Organizational resilience is dependent on releasing the human potential of the organization by increasing staff capacity and engagement – culminating in `systemic thinking` (Senge 2006)

- To enable system thinking organizational members need to see the organization beyond their own position; stop blaming others for poor performance; have ability to provide meaning to incremental change; add evidence to that meaning; learn from others; and dare to do things differently (Senge 2006; Lawler & Sillitoe 2013; Shin et al. 2017).

- Are these insights also relevant for `special` organizations as higher education institutions?

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Why universities struggle with organizational learning

- Universities are more accountable and evidence-based – but to what extent are outcomes really understood in universities – to what extent is university staff engaged in `system thinking` (Dill 1999)?

- Universities typically contains many different quality cultures operating side by side (Harvey & Stensaker 2008)

- Universities are more rarely involved in `double-loop learning` processes and have problems exposing tacit knowledge (Lawler & Sillitoe 2013, Stensaker 2018)

- Universites have become more professional, more hierarchical, more regulated, more specialized…
  - …but are they better coordinated – especially horizontally (Maassen & Stensaker 2019)?

How can universities facilitate organizational learning (1)?

<u>Understanding and making sense of our results to enable `systems thinking`</u>

- Universities are good at collecting data, but rather poor in utilizing them
  - Do we collect the relevant data, and do we focus on data targeting our strategic objectives?
  - We need to increase the focus on process data!

- Who are results and analysis shared with?
  - «Feeding the beast» or using data for shared reflection among staff?

- The promise of learning analytics
  - Going from `after-the-fact` results to a situation where analysis and actions are closely intertwined
  - Stimulating more engagement around what we try to do?

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How can universities facilitate organizational learning (2)?

<u>Creating synergies between the many different `quality cultures` in the university</u>

- Most universities and colleges are multi-disciplinary with sometimes strong academic cultures affecting `how things are done`
    - Negatively affecting the spread of knowledge within universities

- What are possible point of departures for creating synergies?
    - Teaching and learning are increasingly standardized through the use of digital platforms, digital examination, rules and regulations (qualification frameworks, QA, etc)
    - Academic development, for example through requirements of pedagogical qualifications, is an activity that could foster learning across disciplinary boundaries
    - The organizational context surrounding educational offers often determine the formats and ways teaching and learning is taking place – instead of the other way around….

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How can universities facilitate organizational learning (3)?

Facilitating `double-loop learning` in a university setting

- Engaging in systemic thinking about alternatives to the current situatuon
  - Learning from others (European Universities Initiative…?)
  - Benchmarking

- `Shadowing` as a systemic activity within the organization
  - Teaching networks and systematic pedagogical development

- Establish a culture of experimentation and piloting
  - Allow for failures!

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How can universities facilitate organizational learning (4)?

<u>Overcoming the increasing complexity in university organization</u>

- Respond to the challenge of the de-coupled bureaucracy
  - Perhaps time to re-invent the organizational anarchy?
  - The advantages of being «loosely coupled» as an organization

- Support the `quality workers` - those that ties the management of quality to the quality culture….
  - The informal side of universities is often what makes them tick

- Pay attention to the dangers of practices becoming `tacit` or taken for granted
  - Most rules and regulations in universities are developed as department/program level

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Getting there….

- Accept that there are limits to what can be controlled and organized in teaching and learning

  - Remember that culture, identity, and joint practices also are mechanisms for organizational coordination

- Designing a learning organization does not necessarily imply more formal organizing

  - Perhaps time is right for (re-inventing) collegiality – and re-invent `loose couplings`?

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