Agency, context and change in academic development

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Agency, context and change in academic development

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the notions of change that seem to underpin the ways in which academic developers practice within specific organizational contexts and cultures. Drawing on a two-year empirical study across UK institutions it links concepts of change to the different ‘orientations’ that developers consider appropriate to their strategic terrain. It provides an opportunity for colleagues to examine their own concepts of change and a conceptual tool for auditing the extent to which the approaches adopted in our Units and Centres might appropriately address the cultures and needs of our organizations.

Introduction
What emerged from the analysis of data generated from 33 interviews with practising academic developers in the UK was the many-faceted aspect of their agency. They were in some respects a fragmented community of practice. Stones (1991, 1996) has spoken of ‘agent conduct analysis’ and ‘agent context analysis’ as ways of understanding practice, and the agent’s ‘strategic conduct’ and ‘strategic terrain’ as means of characterizing the site of practice. We might perceive the context and strategic terrain of academic development as the organizational forms, academic cultures and sub-cultures within which they have to practise. Their strategic conduct can be characterized by what have I termed their orientation to academic development. Orientations are analytic categories which include the attitudes, knowledge, aims and action tendencies of academic developers in relation to the contexts and challenges of their practice, but they do not relate to developers’ personal characteristics, and are not fixed.

‘Development’, suggests Webb (1996, p. 65) ‘may be viewed as a site for contest: it is not a unitary concept for which, one day, we will provide a model. The very meaning of the word “development”, how it is constituted, the kind of activities it implies, are all discursive, and can be interpreted according to various ontological and epistemological standpoints.’ He argues that there is no ‘super-standard’ from which we can judge these positions, and our notions of development are ‘of necessity a site for encounter and dispute’. The analysis of qualitative data in the present study should be viewed in the light of Webb’s comments. Twelve distinct orientations to practice emerged, which are discussed below. The term orientation, derived from phenomenographic studies, is chosen deliberately as not to imply innate or fixed personal attributes but a way of making sense of a given situation or set of tasks that subsequently informs and influences action. In this definition a practitioner may (and indeed does from the data available in this study) adopt differing orientations in different strategic contexts. Hence it is inappropriate to talk of an individual practitioner as say, a ‘romantic developer’, but rather ‘a developer with a romantic orientation’. The differing orientations may alternatively be viewed as variations on practice, for, as Marton (1999) has recently argued, variation is a crucial dimension of understanding the nature of skill and expertise. These orientations, it is argued, need to be mapped against organizational cultures and the needs and expectations of differing stakeholder groups. They can also be located in terms of their tendency towards emancipatory purposes (critique) or ‘domesticating’ purposes (institutional policy). Practice can have a systemic direction or be
directed towards the needs of individuals, and can be seen to draw on different theoretical perspectives and literatures. This analysis will culminate in a complex theoretical model demonstrating these interacting relationships and influences. It is hoped that, from the accounts discussed below, a better understanding, an *illumination*, of the conceptions and approaches of academic developers to their practice will emerge.

**Orientations to academic development**

The orientations to academic development that were identified in the study can be represented in the form of a typology see Table 1. A fuller discussion of these orientations illustrated by the comments of practitioners may be found in Land (2000).

**Organizational cultures**

Such orientations, to be effective, need to be congruent with the strategic terrain – the organizational culture or cultures within which the developer practises. The most well known of these is probably Becher’s (1989) examination of university culture. Becher stresses the complexity of universities as organizations and provides four main patterns or models of organizational behaviour (Table 2).

The first category in Becher’s typology, *hierarchical* forms, refers to an organizational culture predicated on recognizable lines of command, predetermined bureaucratic procedures and clarity of role. However, Sawbridge (1996, p. 5), in her study of UK employment-led staff development, concluded that ‘...hierarchy, in the form that would be recognisable in the civil service, the army or in many industrial and commercial enterprises, is not evident in universities in spite of distinct trends towards a more sharply defined post-Jarratt (1985) role for vice-chancellors and immediate seniors’. What she did conclude was that hierarchical decision-making was more prevalent in the ex-polytechnic institutions, where staff developers were found by Sawbridge to refer to the Vice-Chancellor as a significant figure far more than in older universities. Smaller HEIs, or

monotechnic institutions, might also be more likely to retain aspects of hierarchical culture.

‘The counter-balance’ she argues, ‘(some would argue that it is a barrier) to more centralised control systems is because of other organisational forms at work. Of most significance in academic folklore and tradition, is the question of *collegiality*, sometimes embraced in the concept of a community of scholars’ (Sawbridge, 1996, p. 5). In this she draws on Becher’s view that hierarchical forms tend to be compromised in academic institutions because ‘there remains a fundamental value in the academic community that the trade in ideas should be free ... the result is a strong sense of collegiality in which scholars are called upon to respect each other’s intellectual independence regardless of age and position. Authority is, in this tradition, always subject to ratification from below’ (Becher, 1989). However, if collegialism is a constant counterweight to hierarchy within academe, then Sawbridge recognizes that a threat to the collegial ideal may still arise from a newer *managerialism*:

It would appear to be the case that the increased focus on employer-led initiatives in the last decade, appraisal, performance-related pay, increasing casualisation of the workforce, trends towards massification and more pro-active staff development to name but a few, is different in character than in the post-1960s. Then the major concerns were about growth within an elitist structure and perceived problems about how to deal with staff, many with unfamiliar pedigrees and/or disruptive and unsocialised students. In this sense one can see employer initiatives, including the growth of interest in staff development, as intervening in the collegial culture because it leaves too much to chance at a time of institutional challenge. (Sawbridge, 1996, p. 6)

However, a countervailing tendency might be observed in relation to *anarchical* forms in that academics in some respects are able to retain an arm’s length independence from their employing institution. ‘Because their reference group is national and international, they are more able to resist managerial pressures’ suggests Sawbridge (1996, p. 7). ‘In any event their subject expertise makes it difficult for managerialist interventions to succeed without their co-operation.’ Becher, also, concludes that the anarchic tendency of some academic organizations, which are ‘more anti-managerial than managerial, concerned with disorganisation rather than organisation ... stems from the high degree of autonomy enjoyed by
### Table 1  Orientations to academic development practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Operational Focus/Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Managerial</td>
<td>Concerned with developing staff towards achievement of institutional goals and mission</td>
<td>Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Political strategist (investor)</td>
<td>Principally aware of shifting power relations within organization and wider HE environment. Aligns development with agencies most likely to yield dividends</td>
<td>Academic development unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Entrepreneurial</td>
<td>Fosters innovative practice related to needs of world of work and employers. Often involved in income-generating, partnership approaches</td>
<td>Employers, other external stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Romantic (ecological humanist)</td>
<td>An outreach approach concerned with the personal development, growth and well-being of individual practitioners within the organization</td>
<td>Individual practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Vigilant opportunist</td>
<td>Takes advantage of topical developments and opportunities in strategic way as they arise within the institution or environment</td>
<td>Academic development unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Researcher</td>
<td>Sees most effective way of influencing colleagues’ practice as being through presentation of compelling educational research evidence</td>
<td>Discipline or community of practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Professional competence</td>
<td>Brings staff up to baseline level of skill competence in aspects of teaching and learning</td>
<td>Service to student body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Reflective practitioner</td>
<td>Seeks to foster culture of self- or peer-evaluative, critical reflection amongst colleagues, to help them cope with uncertain and ambivalent organizational environments</td>
<td>Individual practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Internal consultant</td>
<td>Works with departments or teams in observational/ evaluative/ advisory capacity, often on longer term basis</td>
<td>Department/ course team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Modeller-broker</td>
<td>‘Trojan horse’ approach of working alongside colleagues to demonstrate good practice or innovation. ‘Do as I do’ rather than ‘do as I say’</td>
<td>Individual practitioner/ department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Interpretive-hermeneutic</td>
<td>Dialectic approach of ‘intelligent conversation’ with colleagues in which balancing of different views, relation of local to wider perspectives, part to whole, etc. leads to critical synthesis and production of new shared insights and practice</td>
<td>Individual practitioner/ department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Discipline-specific</td>
<td>Predicated on notion that colleagues are driven by their subject-specific ‘guild’ culture, hence development only effective when going with grain of disciplinary needs. Development can be seen as ‘situated learning’ within a disciplinary community of practice.</td>
<td>Departmental colleagues/ wider ‘guild’ or discipline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
academics.’ However Gouldner (1979) reminds us that there remains an important difference between ‘cosmopolitans’, those outstanding academics whose status allows them a privileged role within managed organizations, and the less privileged, more managed and more put-upon ‘locals’.

Becher’s identification of political forms within academic organization draws attention to the personal and professional power of individuals and groups in decision-making processes. Birnbaum (1988) points out that the most powerful departments are those generating the greatest income through research or fees and in turn attracting the best students, enhancing their status and power further. But political cultures are, according to Becher (1989) usually conflictual cultures and resolution of such internecine strife usually amounts to political expediency, compromise and short-term vision. Sawbridge (1996, pp. 8–9) argues that decision-making within the institution ‘will rest on the degree to which it is seen to be in the political interests of influential people in departments and faculties’. In her study such political power was also found to be a prerequisite of the effective functioning and even survival of academic development units and was dependent on how effectively developers could negotiate with senior staff and on the strength of the constituency they could gather around them.

McNay (1995) alternatively, suggests the four cultures of collegium, bureaucracy, corporation and enterprise, ‘All four co-exist in most universities’, he argues, but with different balances amongst them. These differences depend on a range of factors including traditions, mission, leadership style and external pressures’ (McNay, 1995, pp. 105–6). He provides in Figure 1 a diagrammatic representation of how the four cultures relate to tight or loose coupling in relation to policy definition and control of implementation.

The key word for the collegium, suggests McNay, is ‘freedom’. For bureaucracy it would be ‘regulation’, though ‘This can have many positive objectives: consistency of treatment in areas such as equal opportunities or financial allocations; quality of activities by due process of consideration; propriety of behaviour by regulatory oversight; efficiency through standard operating procedures’ (McNay, 1995, pp. 105–6) In the corporation culture the key word is ‘power’, and in the enterprise culture ‘my choice of key word would be client’.

That carries with it connotations not only of the market, where customers would be more appropriate, but of professionalism where the knowledge and skills of experts, and the needs and wishes of those seeking their services, come together. In organisation terms, it means that key decisions should be located close to the client, within a well-defined general policy framework, and that the good of the client should be the dominant criterion for decision-making. (McNay, 1995, p. 107)

### Table 2 Becher’s four main patterns of organization behaviour (from Sawbridge, 1996, p. 9)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational pattern</th>
<th>Characteristic features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Authority conferred from above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognizable chains of command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-determined regulations and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Specified roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegial</td>
<td>Authority ratified from below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equality of rights in decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decisions exposed to dissent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High personal discretion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anarchical</td>
<td>Authority eroded by personal loyalties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emphasis on individual autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ambiguous goals; pluralistic values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Influence based on expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Authority deriving from personal power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict as basis for decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Policies based on compromise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Influence deriving from interest groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**A model of academic development**

We are now in a position to map the orientations to academic development that were identified earlier against the organizational cultures we have just discussed. We might go further and construct a tentative model which also aligns orientations to academic development with particular stakeholder groups, with bodies of procedural knowledge, and with either emancipatory tendencies or domesticating tendencies in relation, respectively, to institutional policy adoption or policy critique. The diagram that follows at the end of this section (Figure 2) builds into a cumulative representation
of practice. The usual caution would apply against reading too much prescription, closure, or foundationalism into this model. It is intended to be a useful heuristic at a given point of time, and is meant to serve only as a useful and illuminative simplification.

The orientations to academic development discussed above can first be located in relation to two axes each representing polarized tendencies (Figure 2).

The vertical axis charts the extent to which academic development practice might be seen as focused more directly towards meeting the personal needs of individual practitioners (academic staff or students) as opposed to being oriented more towards the requirements of the institution and its functioning at a systemic level. A concern with the efficient implementation of a system of modularization, for example, might be considered as demonstrating a systems orientation whereas concern with helping a junior member of staff cope with the stress levels engendered by burdensome assessment loads might be deemed more as a person orientation.

The horizontal axis again measures polarized tendencies. A domesticating tendency indicates practice that is principally concerned with encouraging or developing behaviours both in self and others that conform with the expressed ‘official’ or explicit purposes or mission of the institution or its prevailing and influential normative culture(s). These may be either explicit and overt or implicit and covert. A liberating tendency on the other hand would indicate practice that ran counter to such prevailing purposes and cultures and sought to transform them.

These tendencies have been adapted from a conceptual model originally proposed by Wellington and Austen (1996) in relation to differences in orientation to reflective practice. It is suggested here that these tendencies have equal validity in relation to how orientations to academic development might be plotted against these differing values. Figure 2 elaborates their model by suggesting that a systems orientation implies the meeting of institutional needs as opposed to the meeting of individual needs through a person orientation. Similarly it is argued that Wellington and Austen’s domesticating-liberating axis can be interpreted as marking a spectrum which emphasizes adherence to expressed policy at one extreme and commitment to ‘emancipatory’ critique at the other. The plotting of specific orientations to academic development against these tendencies can also be found (amongst other factors) in Figure 2. It might of course be argued that not all educational research activity should be construed as offering critique and that educational research can be deployed to support an existing policy stance. Such policy-oriented research would of course be plotted further towards the domesticating end of the horizontal axis. This is omitted on grounds that the model is acknowledged as demonstrating an inevitably simplified view, particularly as further contextual factors are to be added to the model in a pattern of increasing complexity.

One such further factor, superimposed in the diagram, is the organizational culture (strategic terrain) against which the academic developer conducts his or her practice. Again the choice of representative cultures is inevitably a simplification for the sake of greater clarity, and is derived eclectically from the typologies of academic cultural forms and structures discussed earlier. In this simplified representation the letter codings have the following signification:

- A = anarchic culture
- C = collegial culture
- E = enterprise culture
- H = hierarchical culture
- M = managerial culture
- P = political culture

The diagram once more shows how the various orientations to academic development might be
located in relation to these prevailing cultures. For example an interpretive-hermeneutic or researcher orientation would, it is suggested, be a more likely feature of agent conduct, to use Stones’ term (1991, 1996) when the agent context is a mainly anarchic culture, just as a human resource management orientation would be more likely to characterize agent conduct when the agent context and strategic terrain is predominantly a managerial culture.

The diagram incorporates a further factor, namely the bodies of research literature or forms of procedural knowledge from which particular orientations to academic development might be seen principally to draw. A romantic orientation, for example, might well imply a preference for the development literature associated with humanistic psychology, an educational researcher orientation with phenomenography, interpretive-hermeneutic orientation with critical theory or postmodernity and human resource management orientation with the literature.

Layered upon the representation of organizational cultures in the diagram are the various stakeholder groups within higher education whose needs the particular organizational cultures are considered principally to address. Hence within a managerial culture the needs of managers themselves, as well as the collective consumerist presence of the student body, would be valorized. Within an anarchic or collegial culture, however, greater priority, it is argued, is more likely to be given to the needs of individual students or individual academics.

In the diagram all these factors combine and interact to form a complex semantic space the two-dimensional nature of which constrains its representation. Ideally a dynamic three-dimensional representation would serve better to render the fluid and ambiguous nature of the model and its essential tensions. Though by necessity simplified the model is intended to provide a starting point for the examination of issues that arise from a recognition of the interplay between agent conduct and the strategic terrain within which such conduct is found.

**Academic development and change**

A further significant attribute of academic development practice is the practitioner’s attitude to change. Though developers emerged from the study as a fragmented tribe, dwelling in many

neighbourhoods of a divided village, nonetheless one feature which all would appear to have in common is an identification with the notion of change. Some developers are uncomfortable with being seen in any way to predetermine the direction of development. Nonetheless, all recognize that a process of change must be negotiated in some fashion, entered into and supported if the developer’s role is not to be superfluous. Academic developers, unlike, perhaps, other professional groups within higher education, have no vested interest in maintaining the status quo. As we have seen in the analysis of other complex concepts, such as organizational culture and orientation to academic development, attempts at definition inevitably lead to understandings that are multi-faceted, inter-related, overlapping and dynamic. It is not surprising therefore to find that developers’ attitudes to change are similarly variegated and complex. The following represent a range of the conceptions of change that emerged as underpinning developers’ practice, either explicitly or by analogy.

**Systemic models: force field analysis, the law of unintended consequences, unfreezing and refreezing**

I think a lot of it is about identifying what barriers there are around in the system that’re getting in the way of changes – positive changes – that need to be happening. And that’s not always easy because there are so many conflicting forces pushing things this way and that. But it’s often more effective to try and remove barriers if you can identify and locate them than just banging on trying to change things and hitting a brick wall all the time. It’s that notion of a force field with change forces and resistance forces all held in check, in a balance, an equilibrium, and if you move away certain of the resisting forces then you don’t have to keep driving the change. It will just flow, it will free things up. De-constipate it! *(laughs)* (Respondent 21).

An early and influential contributor to theories of organizational change was Lewin (1952) who posited the notion of a *force field* operating in a social system, and emphasized the need when contemplating organizational change to consider not just the forces at the point of change – i.e. destabilizing forces for change – but as far as is possible all the forces operating in the system.

the system had been stable before the change, and any stable system which is disturbed in the first place tries
to return to its former stability. The result is that the forces which previously ensured the stability of the system will now act so as to re-establish that stability, i.e. they will oppose the change (Elton, 1998, p. 1)

As the reactive (stabilizing) forces oppose the original force for change this can mean that the pressure for change produces unintended effects quite dissimilar from those envisaged. This tendency was noted by Tutt (1985, p. 34) and has come to be known as Tutt’s law or the ‘law of unintended consequences’. There is, as Elton has pointed out, a continuously changing balance between the forces which support the change and those which oppose it. Academic developers need to concentrate as much on the barriers to innovation as on the forces supporting it.

As the drivers of change invariably have more control over the supporting than over the opposing forces, they tend to increase the former with the inevitable consequence of the latter also increasing, which is usually a recipe for disaster. The alternative strategy, which involves the drivers of change attempting to reduce the opposing forces, over which they generally have little or no control, may be a difficult one to pursue, but it is the only one which is likely to lead to success. It certainly requires patience and time (Elton 1998, p. 2).

So the innovation process, according to Lewin’s theory, is a political process taking place in a field of mutually opposing forces around an equilibrium, and has to be appreciated in the light of the state of the field as a whole. The main phases of the innovation process are unfreezing, moving and refreezing. ‘Unfreezing’, explain Berg and Östergren (1979, p. 267), ‘signifies that the possibility for change is created. Moving denotes a continuous disequilibrium, caused by the dominance of the driving forces over the restraining forces. Refreezing means that balance is created around a new equilibrium’. The model has obvious implications for the modus operandi of developers of a political-strategic orientation.

Empirical-rational, normative-re-educative and power-coercive strategies

A different respondent introduces the notion of rationality as a mechanism for change in higher education. He speaks of colleagues ‘coming on board’ because ‘they will see the logic’ of ‘a compelling idea’.

Respondent 12’s view is in keeping with influential perspectives originally proposed by Benne and Chin (1969). They suggested three ‘general strategies for effecting changes in human systems’ which were an empirical-rational strategy predicated on reason, a normative-re-educative strategy based on motivation, learning and positive affective factors, and a power-coercive strategy utilizing power relations. In the empirical-rational strategy the underlying assumption is that people are reasonable and, given sufficient understanding of a situation, will act in a rational fashion. Hence the primary task of the innovator is to demonstrate through the best known method the validity of a certain change in terms of increased benefits. Of course the success of this approach depends on the extent to which colleagues will respond rationally. Whereas Respondent 12’s perspective was very much in line with the empirical-rational perspective – which accords well with educational researcher and consultant orientations to academic development – Respondent 1 can be seen to be working within a normative-re-educative framework in which the motivation and conviction of colleagues is seen as crucial to organizational change:

I don’t feel those sort of {managerial} pressures. Well, there probably are but I don’t feel them. No, fortunately, either you are working with people who want to bring about the changes themselves, for whatever reasons . . . there are not many ostriches we have to work with. I know we ought to reach them but my feeling is given that there’s two of us and life is short, it’s better to help the people who want the change, than...you know . . . If you go in with a rigid preconception of what . . . where they should be going, it doesn’t work. (Respondent 1)

This respondent, with a background in nursing, introduces a biological distinction between growth
and development, but points out that, as an academic developer she can only establish a context in which development can occur:

Growth is an increase in size. Development is a change in function. Ha-ha! That is actually true... biologically speaking. Change in function...

The Interviewer: would that apply to higher education?

...yes course it would. As well as the growth of the present methods we use. But I can’t do that. I can provide opportunities for that to occur. But it’s the individual who... I can provide opportunities for people to develop. They can only develop themselves. You can’t change someone. They can only change themselves. You can point out areas where they might want to explore, and having explored will decide to see things differently, but I cannot make that decision for them. (Respondent 1)

Of central importance within a normative-re-educative approach is how the client understands his or her problem. With this strategy the change agent works with the client to discover the client’s attitudes, values and opinions. The change agent seeks to avoid manipulating the client by bringing the values of the client, along with his or her own values, into the open and by working through value conflict responsibly. This approach does seem to have an effect on ‘hearts and minds’, but the timescale involved may be unacceptably long. The normative-re-educative change strategy appears to have the greatest correspondence with romantic and reflective practitioner orientations. A power-coercive strategy, on the other hand, seems, not surprisingly, to be adopted more by those of a political orientation:

And you work with them to engage the people who are in leadership positions. Because there’s not much point in trying to work with the people that you know are going to be really hard to convert. So unfortunately – and this where academic development needs the support of champions in order at some point or other maybe to say to some of the die-hards: ‘You gotta do this guys!’ So I think... that’s overtly political and I think that academic development has always been a political process. (Respondent 2)

or developers of a managerialist orientation who recognize the coercive power of external ‘imperatives’:

The obvious coming imperatives are the RAE 2001 [UK Research Assessment Exercise], and the new Quality Assurance arrangements. These are absolute coming imperatives. Everybody will focus their mind on those issues because they’re up in big neon lights in front of them. (laughs) (Respondent 14)

In power-coercive strategies the change agent may use power to get things done to order, but colleagues may remain unpersuaded of the benefits, refuse to ‘own’ the innovation and harbour resentments which may surface later.

People always see imposed change as something to be resisted but change that they have identified and chosen for themselves they get interested in and are keen on. I quite like the model of change put forward by Hersey and Blanchard (1988), basically saying that if change is imposed then it’s perceived as being that you’ve got to do something differently, i.e. it’s about behaviour. But they point out that change is concerned with knowledge and understanding and attitude. You have to try working from both directions. It’s the old idea of working with people not working on people. (Respondent 28)

Disjointed incrementalism

A key question for developers is the extent to which change can actually be managed in complex organizations. Elton (1998) points out that organizational change has to be considered strategically as a systemic phenomenon, but also that as systems, higher education institutions tend to be very different from each other. The following respondent endorses this view of tackling organizational change systemically:

You’ve got to be capable of systems thinking and of working in the political domain. I think one of the things that academic developers have to get good at is creating the context in which change is possible, and you need these qualities to be able to do that. I think academic developers should pay more attention to creating the context of change rather than just ‘getting on with the change’. (Respondent 28)

Though a rational-deductive ideal, appearing systematic and comprehensive, might be attractive as an approach to organizational decision making, the reality is much more likely to be what Lindblom (1959) referred to, felicitously, as ‘the science of muddling through’. The technical name he gave to the way he felt that decisions are actually made in organizations is disjointed incrementalism. According to Lindblom’s classic model of organizational decision making, decisions tend to be:
• **incremental** – taken a bit at a time, dealing in small changes to the existing situation and therefore easier to comprehend

• **serial** – a series of attacks on problems, which are not usually solved but merely alleviated; decisions only move in the general direction of a solution

• **remedial** – the marginal changes move away from the ills of the day rather than towards defined (strategic) goals

• **means-oriented** – the means (i.e. strategies) are not adjusted to ends (i.e. goals) but often the objectives are redefined so that they can be brought within the cost of the means

• **restricted** – only a restricted number of alternatives is considered, with only a restricted number of consequences for each alternative; in this way the task remains manageable through the exclusion of imponderable possibilities that might prevent any decision being made at all

• **disjointed** – decisions are made by many people at scattered and unco-ordinated decision points

The ‘garbage can’ model of organizational choice

I don’t know if you’re familiar with what Americans call a ‘garbage can’ model of how things . . .

*The interviewer: Cohen and March?*

Right! Well it’s not far off the mark here. This place is definitely a garbage can. There’s all kinds of stuff swilling around in here, in [name of senior committee] and no-one seems ever to link up solutions to what we’re meant to be solving. And then things move on and other stuff keeps coming over the horizon, every bloody day, it seems, and when stuff does get decided it’s usually because the big players have lost interest or it’s just got derailed by something else and things get settled . . . by default I suppose.

*The interviewer: organized anarchy!*

Yes! Absolutely. But don’t get me wrong. If you asked me whether I’d want the culture to be different I’d probably say no. In many respects it suits. There are opportunities. Gaps open up. People’s eye goes off the ball and things can ‘happen’ (*laughs*). I mean I remember quietly squeezing through a module on Independent Learning. Colossal precedent! Students could design their own learning! Not a squeak. Committee were obsessed with some other daft thing about APEL that didn’t matter a hoot as it turned out. (Respondent 21)

This recalls Cohen and March’s (1986) reference to ‘the phenomenon in complex organisations of “important” choices that often appear to just “happen”’. (Cohen and March, 1986, p. 200). Another developer notes how, as Cohen and March would put it, ‘Problems, choices and decision makers arrange and rearrange themselves’.

You know for all the world the senior managers and deans in this place remind me of little kids at Christmas. They’ve got all these projects and initiatives and corporate objectives all over the floor like toys at Christmas. And they get excited because they’ve just unwrapped one present but then they get another and now they’re confused because they don’t know which one to play with first and they keep picking them up and putting them down and then another shiny toy appears, so they chuck the others aside. It’s really like that! They just don’t know what they’re doing. Then another kid comes in and thinks ‘Ooh I like that one too, I think I’ll have that!’ (Respondent 32)

These responses reflect an influential systemic view of universities which was offered by Cohen and March. They characterized their modes of governance as ‘organised anarchies’ (1986, p. 197) and based this assumption on three factors: the ambiguity of goals, the lack of clarity about purposes, and the transient character of many participants’ involvement. This view sees correspondences between the academic freedom found in collegial cultures and the lack of centralized government, and preference for voluntary co-operation that characterizes the political version of anarchism. It similarly recognizes in the two scenarios a concern for responsible individual and collective decision-making.

They draw upon their earlier work (Cohen et al., 1972) relating to ‘garbage can theory’. Garbage cans can have ‘streams’ of problems, solutions, participants and choice opportunities, and these provide opportunities for analysis of situations. ‘A solution’, they suggest, ‘is an answer actively looking for a problem’ (1972, p. 3). Within a garbage can there is no easy causal relationship between problems and solutions, or questions and decisions. ‘Despite the dictum that you cannot find the answer until you have formulated the question well, you often do not know what the question is in organisational problem-solving until you know the answer’ (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 3.)

The interesting aspect of Cohen and March’s analysis is their disengagement of problems and solutions. In their garbage can model a decision is an outcome (or an ‘interpretation’) of several
relatively independent ‘streams’ within an organization. Though ‘problems’ affect everyone in the organization, and stem from such things as job frustration, family, lifestyle, career, relations with colleagues, money and so forth, they are, however, distinct from ‘choices’. Problems ‘may not be resolved when choices are made’. (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 3)

University decision-making frequently does not ‘resolve’ problems. Choices are likely to be made by flight or oversight. University decision processes appear to be sensitive to changes in load. Active decision-makers and problems seem often to track one another through a series of choices without appreciable progress in solving problems. Important choices seem particularly likely not to solve problems. (Cohen and March, 1986, p. 201)

The authors acknowledge that their findings appear to be complex, paradoxical and capricious, yet at the same time appear to be a convincing explanation of ‘how organisations survive when they do not know what they are doing’ (Cohen and March, 1986, pp. 199–200). They point out that their model:

... does enable choices to be made and problems sometimes to be resolved even when the organisation is plagued with goal ambiguity and conflict, with poorly understood problems that wander in and out of the system, with a variable environment and with decision makers who may have other things on their minds. This is no mean achievement. (Cohen and March, 1986, p. 202)

Cybernetic models and loosely coupled systems

As a variant on or development of disjointed incrementalism and garbage can models Birnbaum (1988, 1989) proposes a cybernetic model of decision-making as the most appropriate for higher education institutions. In this approach the institutional system as a whole is goal-directed, but its common purpose is not driven from the top but via ‘multitudinous individual decisions’ at the point of activity.

You’ve heard of the bidet and the shower approach? (laughs). I think probably in my first couple of years here I was a bit too confident about the value of policies and guidelines and putting them through committees and then somehow thinking that would influence people. I’ve become much more sceptical about those although that’s not to say occasionally we don’t still do that. (Respondent 6)

This respondent has learned the value of not putting too much faith in top-down decision making and engages rather in something more akin to ‘multitudinous individual decisions’.

This is not the kind of institution, as I said at the beginning, which really drives things from the top. So we can’t really expect, unfortunately, any strong strategic direction. So in a sense we’re forced to work the bottom-up. But it isn’t entirely bottom-up in the sense we’re not working only with lecturers, I mean, as I’ve said, we work at the Committee level, we work with Heads of Departments, with Deans . . . (Respondent 6)

‘I think change is about complexity and interconnectivity’ suggests Respondent 28, whereas Respondent 1, when asked if change is a rational process, replies ‘I don’t think it is. Well I think it’s multi-layered isn’t it?’ Respondent 12, similarly, recognizes that change is not ‘single-faceted’:

When you said where does the change come from I suppose I had something like yeah outside-inside, inside the institution, . . . the change occurs from a variety of different sources it’s not single-faceted, you can see the government creates lots of pressures, TQA has had a big effect so there’s all these things so . . . internally there are things. (Respondent 12)

As Birnbaum points out, universities seem to have enjoyed a remarkably stable institutional history over many centuries without resort to tightly coupled management structures. Elton (1998, p. 2) points out that such stability depends on ‘constant adjustments and responses through cybernetic controls’ and on ‘self-correcting mechanisms at a micro level based on negative feedback’ with information flowing freely in all directions throughout the organization.

it is the resulting self-correcting mechanism at a micro level which controls the large scale forces which are observable in change processes. It is therefore at this level that the large scale forces must be influenced by the change agent, if they are to be influenced successfully. (Elton, 1998, p. 2).

Birnbaum’s model accords well, as does the garbage can model, with Weick’s notion of loosely coupled organizations. ‘Change in loosely coupled systems’, suggests Weick (1980, pp. 78–79), ‘is continuous, rather than episodic; small scale rather than large; improvisational rather than planned, accommodative rather than constrained and local rather than cosmopolitan . . . To construct a loosely coupled system is to design a system that updates
itself’. Elton (1998, p. 2) warns against the embracing by top management of misleading, deceptively transparent, ‘simplistic cause and effect models’ in hierarchically managed, tightly coupled systems. Cybernetic systems, he advocates, are more accommodative of innovation and do not have chaotic effects. The following respondent clearly shares such a view:

I think there’s an increasing desire amongst senior officers in universities . . . to have tidy pictures. Whereas my view is the world is messy . . . It’s always going to be fluid and dynamic, changing . . . So there’s no point in having this lovely tidy picture because it’s never going to work that way. That doesn’t mean that you let it be completely senseless chaos. So what you’ve got to do is try and have this notion of moving in a direction, that sometimes I think is a bit like crazy-paving. It’s a slightly zig-zagging course that maybe allows for wind-changes and so on. You know essentially the direction you’re trying to move in and you know essentially, at least for periods of time how you’re trying to move there, but the detail will change a great deal. Priorities shift about. (Respondent 14)

**Diffusion models of innovation**

The classical tradition of research into change and innovation views the development of innovations as a process of diffusion. The work of E. Rogers (1967) and Havelock (1973) is representative of this approach. Diffusion is seen as occurring within a system and has a bearing on the nature of the diffusion. One such model of diffusion is Havelock’s (1973) ‘stepping stones’ strategy. The following respondent self-consciously models his practice of innovation on this theory, and provides a simple account of its operation:

I don’t think I’d look at it that way. I don’t know if you’ve come across the ‘stepping stones’ strategy for introducing change? It’s by a guy called Havelock, and he’s an American author. He wrote something like *A Change Agent’s Guide to Innovation in Education*, some years back now. It was quite a simple idea, and it’s something that almost instinctively one tends to do. Do you want to bring about a change? First of all you contact the people you know are already on board with it, and you work with them in order to approach the people that you think are potential converts. (Respondent 2)

Respondent 14 describes ‘Doing work with particular people who are interested . . . you know, departments who are interested, and just trying to drive that forward because they’ve become exemplars that you can attract other people to, and doing these sorts of things, and that’s a deliberate strategy.’ Respondent 18 reflects that ‘I suppose it is a kind of accumulative osmosis’. Respondent 7, similarly, trusts to ‘good contacts’ and ‘personal contact’:

I know how I operate and that it is that I believe that the only way that we can be successful is by personal contact. Which means that you work with people who want to work with you. You hope that they will tell other people and in that way that it will spread. And that takes a number of years. And we’ve made a substantial number of good contacts this way. The alternative is that we announce what we are capable of doing. What we have done and so on and spread it through the Web, through newsletters and so on, and our Director is more inclined towards that. I don’t believe people take sufficient interest to actually do anything to change as a result of reading something. So I very much believe that the personal contact is in fact the only way that we can make progress. (Respondent 7)

‘I think it helps to do things like identifying champions or nurturing champions’, reports Respondent 10, ‘thinking about incremental change and embedding that, bringing others along’.

I think about involving key influences. Sometimes, you know, the ‘not-invented-here’, the champion-from-out-with-the-institution person. I think that there’s a range of tactics you might want to think about, depending on the given change and what would be the most effective way to manage that and the strategic change environment. (Respondent 10)

Respondent 6, operating on a similar basis, says ‘I think we work much more effectively by working with departments we know are active, then try to get some examples out to other people. They see that it works and then we try to bring them on board.’ The diffusion approach would be a strategy particularly favoured by developers of an activist-modeller or discipline-specific orientation.

**‘Organizational cracks’ and opportunistic change**

An alternative model to diffusion innovation has developed which considers change not merely within a system but also of a social system (Berg and Östergren, 1979, p. 262). In this approach, described as ‘a combination of a systems approach and a contingency approach’, there is a greater
emphasize on the behaviour of groups and organizations and on interaction within and between groups. They distinguish between system-consistent and system-divergent innovations.

Our terminology is designed to emphasize that the innovation process is either consistent with or divergent from the main characteristics of the system.

Berg and Östergren reject the efficacy of power-coercive strategies in educational settings because ‘to produce new knowledge or transmit it to students is itself a creative activity at the heart of the system and closely depending on its main properties. Such innovations cannot be inserted from outside: they have to be created anew within the system, by those who are members of it.’ (Berg and Östergren, 1979, p. 262) If, however, as we discussed earlier, any system has a tendency to resist change, how can systemic change ever occur? Their answer lies in the notions of ‘cracks’.

Kai Zen and continuous improvement

Influential though the three-stage systemic model of Lewin has been, not all developers subscribe fully to it. The following respondent considers that the refreezing stage is, given today’s organizational complexity, more problematic.

Lewis Elton uses a three stage model from an author whose name I’ve completely forgotten, which is embarrassing, because it will come to me. But it’s the model . . . you unstick things, you change them and then you let them re-stick again. The author will come back to me.

The interviewer: Lewin?

Kurt Lewin. Right. That’s the one. Now. I suspect that model’s probably two-thirds right. I think the last bit’s getting less important. I think he’s wrong . . . I think it’s more than that. These visionary management text clichés about permanent white water, and so on, I think they’re probably right, by and large. It’s a long time since somebody said to me, when are things going to settle down? I think it’s starting to dawn that they aren’t going to settle down. And part of me’s quite pleased actually, because some of the patterns we settled to in the past were pretty hideous and unproductive and wrong. So it’s going to keep on changing. And one of the tricks is going to be to help people come to terms with that appalling prospect. Namely that things are going to continue changing. I embrace it, I welcome it, I love it. (Respondent 27)

The model that this developer prefers is that of ‘continuous improvement’, associated with the Japanese industrial approach to quality improvement of Kai Zen. The approach also has affinities with the notion of the ‘learning organisation’ (Senge, 1990) and the ‘learning university’ (Duke, 1992).

I used to think that change was about stopping things being wrong and getting them right again. But I’ve since abandoned the simplistic notion of getting things right. I’ll settle for Kai Zen, for continued improvement. I mean I think that’s what it’s about. But in order to talk sensibly about continued improvement, in order to help people achieve it, first of all you’ve got to get help them have the necessary courage, because it’s bloody scary. . . . It’s not entirely scary, I’ll try and come back to that . . . so you’ve got to
give them the courage. You’ve got to give them the resources, by which I don’t mean money, I mean things as simple as thinking space, and things as important as expert colleagues, like academic developers with whom to talk things through. Things like a culture in which it’s possible to talk sensibly about these things. Things like access to ideas and materials which are published somewhere – all of those things. These are all necessary conditions for continuous change. And there are many others besides. But that’s the model I want to shoot to. (Respondent 27)

This developer does not see change as only geared to increased efficiency (‘doing more with less’) but also to debate about the nature of quality – ‘finding out which way’s up’. As he points out ‘Change is not the point. Improvement is the point.’ The notion of continuous improvement within a learning organization can be seen as the institutional equivalent of reflective practice within the individual – an organization talking and listening to itself, evaluating itself, seeking to improve itself. In this regard this model of change would appear to be the most obvious to be embraced by developers of a reflective practice orientation.

Underpinning the idea of continuing change, rather than getting it right, is there’s got to be some agreement on which way is up. On what you mean by improvement. And that’s where I think some leadership is needed on that, possibly following debate, because I don’t think there is much agreement on what’s better. Change is not the point. Improvement is the point. Change must be – going back to our Physics days – must be a vector quantity not a scalar quantity. It must have dimension and direction. And it’s crucial. I think we’re losing it a bit on direction at the moment. I think direction is . . . what is it? It’s . . . Oh God . . . it’s above all about doing more with less. That’s about the only direction there is. And that’s horrible. It’s brutal. So finding out which way’s up. And I hope that that’s what the debates will lead to. And I hope that . . . Yes that’s what I want to do. I want to help . . . I don’t want to tell people which way’s up partly because I don’t know and partly because that’s not a model of development I subscribe to. As a developer I would want to help institutions and disciplines and courses and individual teachers – different constituencies right – to work out which way’s up. It’s coming a bit. The Funding Council’s saying take teaching more seriously. That’s not exactly saying which way’s up, except to say that teaching’s important. It’s a start! (laughs). It’s a great start. But it’s not enough. And some . . . just some debate about that. What would we mean by things getting better? If we can get that debate kicked off, academic development will get easier and more highly valued. (Respondent 27)

Uncertainty, non-linearity and chaotic theories of change

However, in Taylor’s view (1999, p. 142) change does not always have ‘dimension and direction’. It requires a disruption of familiar contexts, a discontinuity and loss of meaning. Taylor distinguishes between ‘plan-driven change’, which he associates with managerialism, and ‘action-driven change’, the flow of which most academics are willing to go along with, and, he argues, is a more effective strategy within academic cultures.

Problem solving is focused on sources of uncertainty which are everyday yet unpredictable, even random. Uncertainty generated by organisational change is different from more ‘natural’ causes in at least two senses: it implies an intention; and it involves a disruption of familiar contexts. When universities change their practices, most academics tend to assume that there are good reasons underlying the decisions – that the need for the change and the processes by which it will be achieved have been considered carefully. Thus, there is a sense that change is imposed in an intentional and reasoned way. But change-focused decision making is made necessarily under conditions of uncertainty. (Taylor, 1999, pp. 142–143)

As academic managers have to grapple with uncertain external factors it is therefore inevitable that their decision-making includes ‘elements of ambiguity, and ‘the outcomes cannot be predetermined’. Academics should not therefore attribute certainty ‘where uncertainty is the case’. Academics need to be wary of misrecognizing the ‘best guesses’ of their managers as informed ‘solutions’ (Taylor, 1999, pp. 142–143). Such a situation, argues Taylor, is ‘an emulation of certainty, when much more tentativeness is called for . . . The expectation of leadership generates both leaders and followers.’ He advocates that academics adopt a practice of ‘self-interested self-management’ (Taylor, 1999, p. 7) based on critical reflection.

But whereas garbage can and cybernetic models were seen earlier to be highly complex but ‘non-chaotic’, Taylor (1999) and Fullan (1993) envisage notions of change which are non-linear and with chaotic tendencies. Fullan enumerates what he calls the ‘Eight Basic Lessons of the New Paradigm of Change’ which is, in effect, a chaotic non-linear view of change based on a postmodern perspective (Fullan, 1993, pp. 21–22):

1. You can’t mandate what matters (The more complex the change the less you can force it).
2. Change is a journey not a blueprint. (Change is non-linear, loaded with uncertainty and excitement and sometimes perverse).
3. Problems are our friends.
4. Vision and strategic planning come later.
5. Individualism and collectivism must have equal power.
6. Neither centralization nor decentralization works (both top-down and bottom-up strategies are necessary).
7. Connection with the wider environment is critical for success (the best organizations learn externally as well as internally).
8. Every person is a change agent. (change is too important to leave to the experts, personal mindset and mastery are the ultimate protection.)

Respondent 21 seems well aware of the chaotic nature of change and the need for ‘personal mindset and mastery’:

I don’t think my Assistant Principal would be too happy to hear this but I’m not sure that you can manage change in an institution like this. The operational environment is too complex. It’s chaotic. I don’t think you can be like a railway signalman pulling levers and changing the direction of things. I see it more that you have to be like one of those Hawaiian surfers. You’ve got one big wave behind you and another coming in from a different angle and there’s a point that you can see you want to get to but the wind’s blowing you away from that point so you twist and turn to try and keep going where you want to get to but then you’re getting closer and closer to the those rocks! (laughs). It really feels more like that! I think you have to surf change these days. (Respondent 21)

This non-linear conception of change would seem to be most likely embraced by developers of opportunistic or entrepreneurial orientation on the one hand and interpretive-hermeneutic on the other.

A model of orientations to academic development and conceptions of change

There are of course further models of change which, space permitting, it would be interesting to pursue in relation to academic development practice. There are clearly managerialist developers who hold to a more linear, causal notion of management by objectives:

Development mainly implies change, but you need to consider the term from the perspective of both its denotations and its connotations. In its denotive sense it means change towards something, but in its connotative sense it implies change for the better, that progress is being made. But I think I would define development as transition management, basically getting from where you are now to where you need to be. And that’s a cycle that will need to be repeated over and over again as time goes on. . . . I think institutions can also become good at institutional signalling. They can do this through contractual requirements, performance review, putting appropriate policies in place, applying resource constraints. These are all levers for change that can be used but all the levers must be pointing in the same direction, and this leads us back to the need for clear strategic direction and management. (Respondent 28)

Others, such as Webb (1996), put emphasis on the role of dialectic and contestation. One could employ a Foucauldian perspective of surveillance, perhaps, and interpret the development of reflective practice entirely differently, as a regime of self-regulation, intermediated by the academic developer ‘therapists’ (Foucault, 1979). Or one could see developers much in the mould of Lipsky’s ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky, 1980), being afforded a high level of front line discretionary power to embed difficult policy objectives when senior management have abrogated responsibility for implementation. Developers of a Romantic orientation might be seen as working within the Rogerian conception of organic growth (Rogers, 1969).

It will suffice here to attempt to map the orientations to academic development identified earlier against the conceptions of change just discussed. Again, as with the proposed model of orientations to academic development, this model is not intended to be in any way deterministic or comprehensive. Some of the interrelationships represented in the model below are closer than others and it is important not to stretch the analogies further than they can go. However the model is intended to draw a reasonable and illuminative set of correspondences between orientation and conception.

It is worth remembering that, whatever change strategy a developer might adopt, he or she should not expect too much recognition for their effort. As Respondent 14 wryly observes:

I am absolutely certain that we are in the business of the management of change. . . . But what we have to do is to make that change palatable as well as
achievable. If we just go in as evangelicals we’ll fail. If we go in as instruments of government or the management or whatever else it is, we’ll fail. So the trick is actually facilitating this change without people thinking we did it. Now of course the rub about doing that is, the better you do that, the less they think you had any part in doing it. So if you’re really superb at doing it they don’t think you did it! (laughs) It’s true. It’s absolutely true. So if you’re really, really good at it, they don’t even realise that you were instrumental in that happening. They think they did it. (laughs)

(Respondent 14)

History, too, can be illuminative:

It must be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage than the creation of a new system. For the initiator has the enmity of all who would profit by the preservation of the old institution and merely lukewarm defenders in those who should gain by the new ones.

Nicolo Machiavelli 1469–1527
(Chapter IV, The Prince)
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