

Organizational Communication and Change Management: Incentives and Strategies for Universities

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1 Introduction

There are many factors now affecting higher education. Four major currents of change can be distinguished (Ward 2000): (1) *Shifts in the Intellectual Division of Labor*. For instance, collaboration with scholars across the oceans is taken for granted, but on the campus colleagues still face significant organizational barriers to collaboration. From another perspective, disciplinary departments are the dominant element in the organization of universities, the cross-fertilization of ideas should be encouraged. (2) *Shifts in the Funding Streams*. The funding of higher education is undergoing changes everywhere – in Finland external funding has greatly increased. With that, collaboration with private companies has rapidly increased. (3) *Demographic Shifts and Accessibility*. Diversity in the student body has increased: there are more international students and more non-traditional students. Life-long learning is becoming more and more important. When it comes to faculty, the baby boomer generation or post-war generation is approaching retirement age. (4) *The Communications Revolution*. According to Inkinen (2001, quoting a Harvard University study from 1991), the megatrends of the 90's were digitality, the Internet, media convergence, and mobile communications. Such phenomena result in digital libraries, distance learning, virtual learning environments, eLearning, and mLearning. What is also happening is the convergence of publishing, broadcasting, telecommunications, and education that is blurring the distinction between education and entertainment.

Taken together, these shifts are causing an irreversible change in higher education. Two prominent figures, Gerhard Casper, the president of Stanford University, and Peter Drucker, the management "guru", have expressed pessimistic views about the future of the university: "A few decades into its second Millenium the University as a corporal entity will not be much as it has been if, indeed, it will continue to exist in a recognisable form." (Casper 1995). "Thirty years from now the big university campuses will be relics. Universities won't survive. It's as large a change as when we first got the printed book. The college won't survive as a residential institution." (Sangrà, quoting Drucker 1997.)

2 Inevitable changes?

Let us have a closer look at the kind of changes that are taking place (cf. Levine 2000). The following changes seem almost inevitable – and they raise questions that we should not ignore, if we are to thrive in the years to come.

¹ This article draws on papers that I have given at the Convention of the National Communication Association in Seattle, November 8–12, 2000, the Organizational Communication and PR Conference (see <http://viesti.jyu.fi/>) in Jyväskylä, January 12, 2001, the EUPRIO Conference of the PR and information officers of European universities (see <http://www.urova.fi/home/EUPRIO/proceedings.htm>) in Rovaniemi, June 16, 2001, and at the first Agora Culture, Art and Technology Seminar in Jyväskylä, August 10, 2001.

1 Higher-education providers will become more numerous and more diverse

A couple of years ago there were about 20 institutions of higher education in Finland, most of them universities with several faculties. That was a large number for a nation of five million. Now we have about 40 polytechnic colleges in addition to the those mentioned. In many areas, the polytechnics directly compete with universities.

Universities also face competition from private companies, some of which are vigorously developing training programs that they offer for their employees, sometimes creating veritable corporate universities, such as Oracle University or Motorola University.

2 Three basic types of colleges and universities are emerging

Traditional institutions, "brick universities," are still the dominant type. However, new usually commercial virtual universities, "click universities," are emerging (e.g. UNEXT and its online Cardean University, and Jones International University, both of which operate globally, with business and ICT orientation). The third type is a combination of the first two, "brick and click" or universities.

3 Higher education is becoming more individualized; students, not institutions, will set the educational agenda

Increasingly, students will come from diverse backgrounds and will have a widening variety of educational needs. New technologies will enable them to receive their education at any time and any place – on a campus, in the office, at home, in the car, on vacation. Each student will be able to choose from a multitude of knowledge providers the form of instruction and courses most consistent with how he or she learns.

4 The focus of higher education is shifting from teaching to learning

As constructivist and experiential ideas of learning gain ground, the role of the teacher is being transformed. The teacher no longer possesses infinite wisdom that he or she presents *ex cathedra* to students who write down every word. Instead, teachers are becoming facilitators, tutors and mentors.

5 Faculty members will become increasingly independent of colleges and universities

More and more professors will no longer be dependent on university work. They will coexist in two worlds, the academe and corporate life. How can universities continue to recruit the best talent?

6 Degrees will wither in importance

In the old days, a university degree guaranteed a secure, well-paid job, for life. Now the role of diplomas is decreasing. Employers recruiting employees now look for special skills and talents.

7 Every person will have an educational passport.

Students and faculty alike will have an educational passport in the form of a digital portfolio containing a CV, samples of work, publications etc. Such a portfolio can be useful both for the person and for an employer recruiting new employees.

3 Major issues

Let us have a closer look at some of the issues raised. I'll deal with the following issues: generations, strategic thinking, bricks and clicks, openness and networking, hierarchy and communication, communication skills and, finally, the role of information and communication technology.

3.1 Generations

It may be to some extent stereotypical thinking, but there is something interesting in trying to identify the essential characteristics or *Zeitgeist* of generations. The two latest generations are generation X, the thirty-something cohort, and generation Y, now entering their twenties. Generation Y is also called the dot.com generation, the millennials, the network generation and the global generation. Generation X is cynical and individualistic; generation Y optimistic and team-oriented. What unites them is business-orientation, both are highly entrepreneurial. Both get information very quickly, from TV, the Internet, mobile phones. They differ greatly from the generation of their parents, the baby boomer generation.

Each generation challenges the values of the previous generation. What are the values of the young generations now in universities or entering universities? In a study of 18 to 30-year-old Italians, Francesco Morace (Future Concept Lab, Milan, Italy; <http://www.futureconceptlab.com/>) identifies the following three basic values of this generation, that he calls *extragenerazione*: The first value is sharing, an extreme need to create connections, profound affinity in family, with significant others, with friends, not to prove something but to establish something in common. Here, information and communication technologies increase the possibility of promoting and maintaining the connections. The second value is creativity, a fundamental component in all activities of the extrageneration. From details of attire to choice of work, creativity is seen as the new luxury, or, as the possibility to feel rich in new experiences and contents. The third value is nomadism. Nomads move from one situation to another and from one context to another. They see life as a procession of stations, cities, friendships and cultural products.

Institutions built by boomers for boomers may be a poor fit for tomorrow's students and workers. In the book *Millennials rising: The Next Great Generation*, Neil Howe and William Strauss predict that U.S. campuses will be unrecognizable in the year 2010. The millennials are practical and entrepreneurial. They are ambitious and they want tight academic standards. In their opinion, this generation will do great things.

Howe and Strauss also predict that the role of the boomer parents of the millennial generation is intruding. In fact, they suggest that universities will set up offices for parental relations to deal with anxious and intruding parents.

3.2 Discovery of the importance of strategic thinking

In view of the many currents of change affecting higher education, there seem to be three possibilities for universities: to resist change, to do nothing, to change. The first two possibilities will probably be unwieldy, leading to what Gerhard Casper and Peter Drucker prophesied. Even though universities may have successfully fought off external pressures to change in the past without changing their practices, this will not be possible in the information age. The pressures have mounted.

In universities, various plans and strategies for the future have been made. Such strategies range from more technical Information Technology plans to Knowledge Strategies. Knowledge strategies can be seen in a narrow and in a broad sense. Narrowly defined it is a plan for purchasing and maintaining computers and computer programs. In a broad definition it is a plan for the future activities of the organization, a tool for the development of the entire organization. To be real, change has to be institution-wide. To be real, strategies need to be implemented.

3.3 Bricks and clicks

When it comes to changing universities, the big question is: only clicks or bricks and clicks? A combination of "bricks and clicks" may be the most competitive and attractive solution. While students appreciate the convenience, ease, and freedom of services online, they also want a physical space where they can interact with others and obtain expert advice and assistance face-to-face.

Following this line of thinking, Finland has in the year 2000 started a national Virtual University Project in a bricks and clicks approach to change. In other words, the "brick" universities will be complemented with a national Virtual University project. The idea is not to found a new, virtual university that can grant degrees, but to transform the present universities to "virtual" universities. The choice of word may be unhappy, but what is meant is a bricks and clicks approach.

Work on the local manifestations of the national Virtual University is in full swing. Simultaneously, both discipline-based and topic-based networks have been formed. The Finnish University Network for Communication Sciences (<http://www.uta.fi/viesverk>) is an example of a discipline-based network, consisting of all departments that have a full program in any area of communication. The number of such programs in Finland is about twenty. The IT Pedagogy Network (<http://www.uta.fi/itpeda/>) is an example of a topic-based network, connecting those who are interested in the strategic aspects of the adoption of information and communication technologies in universities. In all, there are more than thirty networks within the Virtual University project.

Such networks represent a novel approach and one thing is clear: for the network to function, everything has to be open, based on genuine interest, not on position. In other words, the networks should be as non-hierarchical as possible.

3.4 Hierarchy and communication

Hierarchical organizations are characterized by positions, authority, rules, discipline, division of work life and private life, as well as the importance of formal qualifications in recruiting new members to the organization. Hierarchical organizations tend to cling to traditions and see little need for change; risks are not taken, and attempts are made to remedy problems only after the problems have surfaced.

Of course, the description above is more like a caricature. In reality, organizations are changing everywhere, even though at varying speeds. Universities have always been a mixture when it comes to hierarchy: on one hand, a rigid hierarchy, on the other hand, much personal freedom.

Right now, new forms of organization are emerging, among them the knowledge-intensive organization (or "post-modern"), characterized by flat and flexible structure, team and project work, collaboration and competition, and the use of information and communication technologies. Such organizations can be distributed, uniting

geographically distant members or parts of the organization by means of information and communication technologies.

It is evident that flatter organizations need new tools for communication and collaboration. In fact, they cannot exist without effective communication.

3.5 Communication skills

It is almost a commonplace to talk about the importance of communication – its importance is widely accepted. But what kind of communication skills are important? For teachers, it is not enough to be able to disseminate information by delivering lectures – instead, they should learn to know the students and interact with them face-to-face or by means of ICT and thus help the students to learn. For students, it is not enough to sit in classes and write down what the teacher says – instead, they should learn both on their own and by interacting with their teachers and with their fellow students. Quoting Carole Barone (2001): “students who have grown up ‘digital’ expect to be involved in active, social learning situations in which they participate in the creation of knowledge rather than passively absorbing information”.

Thus, two-way communication instead of one-way communication is called for. Two-way communication requires interpersonal and group communication skills, such as listening, persuading, negotiating, collaborating etc. Such skills are useful both for students and teachers.

3.6 Change agents

Organizations are changing. Information-based organizations are displacing the old hierarchical or command-and-control organizations. For change to take place, change agents are needed.

Of course, there is no lack of innovative and individual persons in universities. Here I discuss one type of change agents common in universities all over Europe: exchange students and teachers. I believe that exchange students and teachers play an important role as change agents in a European perspective. Student and teacher exchange is now lively within the European Union and also with non-EU countries, especially Eastern European countries.

When visiting a foreign university, students and teachers experience a different academic culture. They see novel approaches to teaching and learning. They experience many kinds of communication cultures. Naturally, the students and teachers will compare the academic cultures – and discuss their observations both abroad and in their home universities. Such observations can be very enriching – and sometimes dramatic. For instance, some of the exchange students that have come to Finland have been truly astonished to notice that it is common for students and teachers to say hello and talk with each other.

3.7 Role of information and communication technology

Many kinds of visions about the role of technology in higher education have been presented. Here I combine some recent ideas, drawing especially from a project being carried out at the Helsinki University of Technology by the Student Union.

The student-run project has come up with a Technologically Supported Academic Environment. The environment connects students, faculty, and staff by means of line

phones and mobile phones, as well as wired and wireless computer networks. The environment may be composed of many services or functions, such as:

- Personal communication by means of phone, email and video conferencing complementing face-to-face communication
- Distribution of information about courses, e.g. last-minute changes by means of text messaging and email
- Access to study records with personal computer
- Making and maintaining a personal study plan, which is continually updated as courses are taken
- Taking courses in learning platforms (e.g. WebCT, Blackboard, Optima) and complementing face-to-face courses with learningware
- Complementing paper distribution of study materials with electronic distribution
- Creating CVs and personal digital portfolios
- Online tutoring, complementing face-to-face tutoring

Of course, a high technological level is presupposed: everyone in the academic community should have a mobile phone and a computer, preferably a lap-top wirelessly connected to the Internet.

The experience of studying and teaching in this kind of an environment may be quite different from the traditional environment – and at least some of the services are actually available in some universities. However, such concepts or visions raise perplexing questions. Are the visions too technologically-minded? What would be a working balance between old proven ways and innovative technological solutions? Are university studies in the future possible without the use of ICT?

A further question is, as we are discussing technology, what is good technology?

Good technology is (Downs 2000):

- always available
- always on
- always connected
- standardized
- simple
- does not require parts
- personalized
- modular
- "idiot proof" – that is, it does what you want it to do.

It is clear that present-day technology does not always reach this level...

4 Visions

What will universities be like in five years? Basically, learning will be the same, based on both individual work and on collaborative efforts. The working life requires communication, collaboration and information and communication technology skills from students, as part of their expertise. Innovations in ICT will bring new ways of learning to complement the old ways; "virtual" or web-based learning will be common. For that purpose, there are smaller, less costly and wireless devices with a simple interface; in general, ICT has become an integral part of everyday life and studies. With such devices, it is easy to acquire bibliographical information about research papers and publications, as well as full-text copies of these papers and publications. However, much attention has to be given to teaching source criticism. Unfortunately, there will still be inequality in higher education e.g. in the area of competence in the

digital learning tools. The digital divide is not deep in Finland but extremely deep in the world as a whole.

In a personal vision, learning in universities will be networked both locally and globally. The concept of a *metacampus* (Sangrá 2001), extending the traditional university to (in principle) global dimensions, is enticing. It is self-evident that teachers and researchers are also networked. Networking tends to flatten hierarchy, and non-hierarchical organizations favour learning and research. ICT will support learning and teaching, but it will not replace face-to-face interaction between members of the academic community – instead, it will provide new tools for interaction.

In my opinion, a recent paper by Robert Rosenzweig (1999/2000) captures something essential in these times of flux and change: universities change, core values should not. In his opinion, the hallmarks of higher education are faculty cooperation, intellectual independence, and research quality. I do hope that such fundamental values characterize universities also in the future.

Personally, I believe that universities will exist after 30 years, though not the way we know them now. Peter Drucker has also written: “Online continuing education is creating a distinct educational realm, and it is the future of education.” I’d like to believe that in the future we’ll have universities that combine the best traditions of bricks and the innovations of clicks!

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