Paper for AARE Sydney 2000, presented on Thursday 7 December.

## fli00054

# Culture Club. An Investigation of Organisational Culture.

# Nerilee Flint. University of South Australia.

### The importance of culture

The statement by Evans that 'Organizational culture is both product and process, effect and cause' gives a sense of the power and importance of culture. Once a culture is established

it not only shapes people's behavior, perception, and understanding of events, it provides a template for learning. Culture exerts a profound impact on the induction and orientation of organizational members and on the way an organization responds to changes in its environment (p44).

Culture is usually regarded as an asset because it has an important role in fostering social cohesion and reducing uncertainty, particularly for people new to the group. Culture facilitates organisational processes of co-ordination and control and can be an important source of motivation for members. As stated by Brown some commentators on culture suggest that 'with the decline in the role of the Church, work organisations have become increasingly influential in their impact on people's thinking and behaviour' (p59).

Some authors have argued that an organisation's culture can also be a problem. According to Evans a very strong culture will resist change and new influences and tends to grow more conservative with age. Interestingly weak, negative cultures also resist change and even though this may seem paradoxical it is understandable when the anxiety-reducing function of culture is considered. People will rarely question their basic assumptions, and even if the culture is dysfunctional they will cling to what makes them feel secure.

#### Background to this paper

Within an investigation of tertiary students' perceptions of the fairness of educational assessment using grounded theory methodology, it became apparent that it was important to consider the influence of course culture. This was due to the fact that there were many similarities but also a number of differences between students' comments from two different undergraduate courses that may be attributable to the similarities and differences between the cultures of the two courses. An ecological framework has been adopted as it offers a new perspective on the complex issue of students' perceptions and it allows for a linked examination of the elements that surface in the interviews with students. Ecological frameworks allow issues to be viewed in context and in a non-linear way. It is important the students' talk is viewed in context as all students operate in multiple contexts at any one time and are not simply exposed to the single context of the university campus. A non-linear framework is necessary to attempt to adequately represent the complexity of the subject.

To date a total of twenty students from two undergraduate courses within the same school of a university have been interviewed using a semi-structured interview procedure for between forty-five and seventy minutes. Interviews have been transcribed and themes and concepts

organization that reflect those norms, assumptions, and beliefs' (p82). Schein describes the climate as 'the feeling that is conveyed in a group by the physical layout and the way in which members of the organization interact with each other, with customers, or with outsiders'.

### Groups without a culture

Groups do not automatically have a culture. A group has to get to the stage of having shared assumptions for it to have a culture. According to Schein , for a culture to be present it would usually require the group to have been together long enough to have shared significant problems; to have had opportunities to solve these problems and observe the effects of their problem solving; and to have taken in new members. Some groups will not develop integrated cultures and this will lead to situations full of conflict and ambiguity. Schein reasons that this may be the result of a number of factors including unstable membership, the presence of many subgroups with varied shared experiences, or simply a lack of shared experiences of the main group. According to Pedersen and Sorensen when they studied a group that had not taken in new members it was a study more of cultural founders and an emerging culture.

## Components of culture

Schein describes three levels of culture: artefacts and creations, values, and basic assumptions. Most visible and tangible is the first level, the artefacts and creations. This is the physical and social environment. It includes the myths and stories about the organisation, the architecture, published lists of values, the norms of behaviour, the technology, the style of dress, rituals, ceremonies, customs and language. 'For purposes of cultural analysis this level also includes the visible behavior of the group and the organizational processes into which such behavior is made routine'. Whilst this level of culture is the most easily observed and readily visible it is often difficult to interpret as artefacts are symbolic of the culture itself and things may not mean what a viewer may think they mean. They often cannot be understood until the organisation is known quite well and an understanding of the deepest level of culture, the assumptions, is necessary for many of the artefacts and behaviour to make sense.

Slightly less visible than artefacts and very complex is Schein's second level of culture, an organisation's values. 'Espoused values are those which are developed within a group when decisions are made by the groups and found to succeed'. If the solution is seen as reliable for that problem the group takes it on board as the way it is to be done, so whereas originally it was a hypothesis it ultimately becomes accepted as a reality and is transformed into a shared value or belief that is no longer questioned . Values of this type can operate at varying levels of awareness. Members of many organisations, which could include a university course, can oft

one can attempt to identify the paradigm which drives the way the people think, perceive and judge situations. An example of a basic assumption held by staff in a university course may be that students want to pass assessment items. To those staff it is inconceivable that a student would attend university with no intention of being successful in assessment. Students might hold assumptions that there is a relationship between the amount of time that they spend on an assignment and the mark that they receive for it.

Whilst people studying culture place varying emphases on artefacts and behaviour, Owens states that the literature consistently claims that there are two themes, those of norms and assumptions, which 'are widely regarded as key components of organizational culture' (p83). The difficulty with understanding both of these is that they are unwritten and in reference to assumptions, unconsciously taken for granted. Norms express the shared beliefs of most group members about how it is one should act and behave and it is the assumptions underneath this that drive the norms.

## The culture of a school

Culture is complex and layered and resists an easy description. This is also true for attempting to define what a school's culture is. Dalin and Rolff suggest that what we can see is how people are behaving and that one way to understand the culture of a school is to study the characteristics of schools as organisations. They present a model which shows a 'school as an organisation where there is a mutual interdependency among the five variables: environment, values, structure, human relations and strategies'.

Dalin and Rolff concur with Hodgkinson that school culture is a complex phenomenon and that it appears at three levels:

1 <u>The transrational level</u>: where values are conceived as metaphysical, based on beliefs, ethical code and moral insights.

2 <u>The rational level</u>: where values are seen and grounded within a social context of norms, customs, expectations and standards, and depend on collective justification.

3 <u>The subrational level</u>: where values are experienced as personal preferences and feelings; they are rooted in emotion, are basic, direct, affective and behaviouristic in character. They are basically asocial and amoral.

'Values' are the focus in Dalin and Rolff and Hodgkinson's concept of culture. Hodgkinson

level, usually show clear values at the rational level, and that the subrational level plays a very important role. They claim that the latter is so partly because schools are not used to expressing themselves at a rational level and that individual teachers have a high degree of autonomy therefore power. This allows personal preferences to play an important role, which is in keeping with the way university lecturers perceive themselves. Viewing culture from this perspective makes it very clear that 'individuals and their relations are a very important determinant of what constitutes a 'school culture'' .

It is also possible to have values but not act upon them. A student might believe it is desirable to review lecture notes at the end of each day whilst never actually doing it. Staff

- 1 history of the organisation
- 2 symbolic myths and stories about the organisation
- 3 espoused values and beliefs of the organisation
- 4 expectations for behaviour in the organisation
- 5 rites and rituals which have symbolic value in the organisation
- 6 heroes and heroines that sym

Well demarcated beginnings and endings

bel

behaviours. The researcher would need to collect data on the significant historical events of the course, the impact of the heroes on current thinking and the ways in which crises have been dealt with in the past. After much analysis and data collection the res

#### Conclusion

Organisational culture has an incredible function and is an incredible function as it is both product and process, it is both effect and cause. Evans citing Bolman and Deal claims it 'represents the collective knowledge of our predecessors, and it is perpetually renewed as we initiate new members, who eventually initiate others, and so on'. Once a culture is established it provides the template for organisational learning as well as shaping people's behaviour, perception and understanding of events.

It is for these reasons that it is important in the investigation of tertiary students' perceptions of the fairness of educational assessment to include an examination of the cultural influence of the course that the students are studying. Further reading in the area of institutional ethnography has been conducted to extend the understanding of the researcher on the influence of culture on organisations. This suggests a different approach to understanding the influence of the culture of the course on the students' perceptions. Institutional ethnography is more 'in keeping' with grounded theory methodology, which aims to stay 'true' to the data, the words of the students, than the methods outlined in this paper. Institutional ethnography will be utilised in this study and a future paper is planned which will explain the method and methodology.

References