

Abstract for Engage 2012 Conference

Structures of Business Engagement: Enabling Exploratory Micro Processes

Dr Clinton Bantock

Theme: **Academic research models of knowledge exchange and engagement**

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Introduction and Objectives

The purpose of the paper is to build on the conclusions presented at the Engage 2010 conference. It will illustrate the manner in which the actions and exploratory processes of the business development manager are affected by different structures of business engagement existing in a university. It is also to continue to develop the outlines of a theoretical framework of business engagement between university and industry through the lens of social complexity.

Methodology

The paper draws on research conducted of a university faculty as a group of academics and practitioners attempted to set up a business engagement unit in a business school of a West Midlands university. Data was collected through a number of sources including extensive participant journal observations made by the researcher who was a business engagement manager in the faculty; in depth interviews of 14 key participants involved in business engagement from across the university; extensive email threads related to events analysed in the research and official faculty and university documentation. The data was analysed using a mixture of grounded analysis using NVIVO and a narrative event sequence which analysed systematically the occurrence of events over time. The events were linked into a progression to create temporal maps which provided the basis for the generative patterns of social complexity that linked the events.

Analysis and results

The research found that the innovation of university service occurred within three different structures designated as spaces of possibilities (Bantock, 2012). The first structure was the teaching and learning space, because it was supported by large amounts of capital resources, was the dominant space (ibid). Actions in the teaching and learning space were characterised by a formalised interaction based on defined rules. Action was said to be intentional in which controlled ends were to be delivered by the means provided. In fact new courses could not be validated without the provision, at the outset, of the means to deliver the programme. The teaching and learning space set out therefore to be a predictable world from which there was expected to be little or no variance. Risk to the system had therefore been minimised with the result that exploratory processes were significantly minimised.

The adjacent space

The second structure was an adjacent space (ibid) which was set up by agents in the dominant space to provide revenue different from undergraduate and postgraduate provision and which, in the research setting, became the delivery arm for funded project work. The activities of funded project work were formalised around defined rules that determined the activity to be delivered and the type of recipient of the activity. Actions were planned in advance and monitored against a plan using a logic of explanation (Chia and Holt, 2006). It was based on an assumption similar to that in the teaching and learning space, that variance could be removed from a process through planned remedial action.

The consequence of this was that the actors in the adjacent space, set up to deliver funded project work, could be seen to be acting in a way that was understood by the actors in the dominant space and therefore tolerated. The actors in the dominant space were able to impose structures on the activity that allowed them to review what was happening and to be assured that risk had been minimised. Yet the closeness of the adjacent space to the dominant space meant that change was managed and controlled, limiting the possibility of transformational change in the faculty.

The disruptive space

The third structure was a further adjacent space that was set up to deliver commercial activity. However because it was significantly different from the dominant space it had a disruptive effect on the interactions in the dominant space. Consequently this adjacent space was labelled a disruptive space and was characterised by its potential for transformational change to the university institution.

The actors in the disruptive space worked through personal relationships with actors in business in the expectation that at some point they would be able to create an emergence. However the exact outcome was unknown and unpredictable at the outset. They set about achieving an emergence through the 'mutual weaving of obligation networks' (Darr, 2007). It meant that the actors in the business development unit worked not only on a personal basis, rather than a contractual one as in the adjacent space, but also that they gave precedence to the micro processes of an exploratory approach to business engagement (Bantock, 2012).

The actors in the dominant space, when confronted by a successful action in terms of additional revenue being generated, had the choice of putting a stop to the change as they did in one incident in the research, accusing the faculty of mission drift or they could change their own interactions. This therefore implied that transformational change could occur only when the actors in the dominant space co-evolved with the actors in the disruptive space.

Implication and recommendations

A clear distinction should be made between funded project work and that of commercial work. The consequence of not doing so is to expect what cannot be delivered. The consequence of pursuing commercial work through the disruptive space will have significant implications. If universities need revenue for investment in other areas of the institution, which cannot be done through the management fee of funded project work, it will have to be achieved through

commercial work in the disruptive space with its attendant ramifications. Choosing which space the institution operates within has a consequence for its future development.

Areas of development

The research was based on observations of one faculty in one higher education institution. It is necessary to take the conceptual framework into other higher education institutions in order to triangulate the conclusions. This is particularly the case with regards to the claim that it is not possible to develop transformational change in an adjacent space based on funded project work.

References

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Dr Clinton Bantock
Birmingham City University
Business School
City North Campus
Perry Barr
Birmingham
B42 2SU
0121 331 6432
clinton.bantock@bcu.ac.uk