

## FURTHER EXPLORATIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

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A commentary on “Preaching What We Practice: How Institutional Culture Supports Quality Teaching” by Jessica Riddell and Corinne A. Haigh

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Some places are memorable, evoke certain feelings, withstand the test of time, and serve as gathering places that people continue to return to. Such places can be said to have what is called a “sense of place.” Architect and McGill Professor of Architecture Avi Friedman says that “Good places provide a wonderful backdrop to a process that is happening there. So it is a combination of how the place presents itself and how the people who use that place engage in it” (Mullins, 2012). What gives an institution, a department, a classroom, a sense of place and, for this discussion, a sense of place where good teaching and learning happen? When we design the teaching and learning spaces of our higher education institutions, how attentive and intentional are we in designing space that, as Riddell and Haigh say, “nurtures and enhances exemplary teaching” (p. 6) and that helps students achieve intended learning outcomes? A place where all members of the community may feel that *this is a place where curiosity is fostered, where I am challenged to think beyond my field*, a place where people remark there exists an institutional culture that values teaching and learning.

There are many reasons to focus on developing an institutional culture that promotes teaching and learning, and Riddell and Haigh direct us to this literature throughout their article. With a newly formed teaching centre, they have seized an opportunity that many of us at established centres may not always take the time to do: identify the theories underlying the approaches we take in our work. We are

reminded to (re)examine the assumptions which we have perhaps come to take for granted in our practice as educational developers and lay bare what informs our work. Given the size of our teaching centre at the University of Waterloo (19 full-time staff), we find it challenging to remain informed about all of our colleagues' projects and activities. We provide an extensive variety of educational development services, but taking the time to identify the theories that underpin our work requires additional conscious effort. We have started to engage in all-staff professional development sessions during our staff meetings to assist in revealing such theories, but more can always be done. So far we have only touched on theories about learning, motivation, and assessment of learning. These can inform and affect how we approach our work, but an even more fundamental area would seem to be our theories of change. How can we be even more effective at promoting change in those with whom we work and in the contexts in which we work?

Perhaps one way to do this is to make the institutional culture more visible to those of us embedded in it. Riddell and Haigh comment that "with any dominant ideology, the common set of shared beliefs, values, assumptions, and traditions are for the most part taken for granted and therefore invisible to members within the specific ideological framework" (p. 8). Certainly we feel this culture. We make decisions based on it. It may determine what is taught and not taught at the institution. It may determine what is discussed and not discussed at department meetings and in office hallways. We use and share the symbols and language of this culture. But can we see it? In order to *develop* a culture of teaching, we must first be able to *see* and describe it. For can we intentionally develop the invisible? In the terms of developmental psychologist, Robert Kegan, we must make teaching culture "object," so that we can reflect on it and its influence, ask questions of it, and "look *at*" it, rather than "look *through*" it (Kegan, 1982; Kegan & Lahey, 2009). Only then can we make changes that help us achieve the outcomes we hope for. Social psychologist Edgar Schein (2004) suggests that organizational culture has three levels of visibility: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions. In his model, the visibility is greatest at the artifacts level (e.g., documents, processes), but exploring all of the levels is necessary to understand a culture despite being potentially uncomfortable and challenging to do.

When we encourage change in a culture, we are asking people to lay bare the layers of what drives their behaviours. But we are also asking that people, that institutions, give up ways of knowing and being that are comfortable and that may in fact be working very well for them.

As many have discussed elsewhere (e.g., Atherton, 2008; Berger, 2004; Boyd & Myers, 1988; Perry, 1981), developmental change may involve feelings of risk and loss, along with feelings of excitement and hope. We may sense, either consciously or subconsciously, that there are costs associated with making these changes. We may experience what Kegan and his colleague Lisa Lahey (2009) have termed “immunity to change.” That is, as individual instructors, as departments, or as institutions, we may know that we want to foster a culture of teaching and learning. We may know what we could or should do to help this intention materialize (focus on student learning outcomes, support the pedagogical development of teachers, etc.). We may even know what we are doing (or not doing) that works against our intentions (not providing time and resources to focus on teaching development, not recognizing and rewarding teaching, etc.). Yet, we do not do the things we could or should do. Why? Not because we are unwilling, or have ill-will, or are not intelligent enough to do so. Rather because, as Kegan and Lahey’s (2009) extensive research shows, we have “competing commitments” – priorities which may be hidden, or not so hidden, and which prevent us from taking action, thus creating an “immunity” to change.

They provide many examples of this immunity challenge in their book, including that of Peter, a CEO. Peter would like to “be more receptive to new ideas.” However, he currently gives “curt responses to new ideas” using a “‘closing off,’ ‘cutting off,’ or overruling tone” (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, p. 36). What Peter ultimately realizes through using the “immunity to change” method, is that he is committed to having things done his way. This commitment is ultimately working against his commitment to be more receptive to new ideas. So, as we move forward in our individual and collective work to foster a culture of teaching and learning in our institutions, we may need to search beneath the surface to try to uncover any competing commitments. Do we want to preserve our institution’s reputation for being committed to excellence in research (and fear the increasing commitment to excellence in teaching might hinder this)? Do we want to preserve the idea that discipline-specific research trumps interdisciplinary research (which includes the scholarship of teaching and learning)? As educational developers, we may need to ask these types of questions to help create some discomfort and dialogue about how things are and how they could be, or find ways to “frame devil’s advocate inquiries to help others question the status” (Blumberg, 2011, p.176).

If we commit to fostering an institutional culture that values teaching and learning, how can we assess the impact of this focus? Riddell and Haigh’s case study within their article reinforces our

thoughts about the need for *aligned* Centre assessments. They argue for the importance of an institutional culture that values quality teaching, and the assessment questions that they provide align with that focus: needs and beliefs about teaching and learning, supports for teaching and learning within the culture, and the value placed on pedagogical activities and resources. It is time-consuming and challenging to assess the work of a teaching centre, but having assessment questions that align with core goals or values can help to keep the scope more manageable. They can also make the results more meaningful because core elements are investigated rather than the focus simply being assessment data that are easy to obtain (e.g., participant satisfaction).

But how far can we go? A culture that values teaching and learning needs to stem from everyone involved in that culture. It appears that Bishop's is on the right track by involving as many of their faculty and librarians as they can through offering a variety of ways into the conversations about teaching and learning. Conversations help us to exchange ideas as well as sharpen our thinking. We would like to hear more about where the students fit into this conversation. "Quality teaching" traditionally has been equated with teaching that puts students and their learning at the core (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2003). Maybe students are engaging through SoTL projects as co-inquirers, or maybe they remain subjects in such studies. Recognizing their contributions to the teaching and learning culture may be an important next step for Bishop's and for all of us who seek to encourage some shifts in our institutional cultures, in our sense of our place.

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