



Understanding how we accomplish difficult and ambitious change in higher education institutions

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Getting started

There has to be a beginning to any discussion. This paper (I hope!) launches a discussion through which we can develop many different perspectives on complex change and grow a deeper understanding about how we accomplish and evaluate it.

This topic was chosen because it is one that we can all relate to. It is symptomatic of the age we live in that in the space of a year my department at the University of Surrey was closed down (because we did not change quickly enough!), and my other employer - the Learning and Teaching Support Network – merged with other bodies to form the Higher Education Academy (in the belief that this change would improve the support for enhancement in higher education). The new organization is different from the old and this requires changes in thinking and practice. As if this was not enough I am adapting to the new family I came into when I remarried eighteen months ago. These recent experiences of change remind me that it doesn't matter how much we know about change, we still have to learn how to do it as we do it because the context, substance, dynamics and people involved in every change situation are different. But knowing something about change helps us to anticipate and interpret what is happening, respond more wisely to things as they emerge and not do things that are unlikely to work. They also remind me that we cannot separate our personal and professional lives – change in one affects the other.

Big and profound change is endemic in our working lives and we invest a huge amount of physical, intellectual and emotional energy in participating in change and changing ourselves in the process. Change is a subject worthy of intellectual exploration in order to understand and do it better.

As in our previous joint networks discussion on the *meaning of evidence based practice in higher education*, we will use short papers to try to stimulate thinking and email discussion. The papers and transcripts of discussions will be archived on the discussion web page to create a permanent and accessible resource.

The beauty of these discussions is that we don't know where they will take us. There is an element of unpredictability and risk in email discussions and you all have the potential to change the course of the discussion with your own perspectives and stories. We welcome contributions in the form of short discussion papers, personal stories or institutional case studies. All we ask of contributors is that you provide your own perspectives and raise questions to stimulate further discussion.

Our ambition is that discussion will occur within a number of networks, each with their distinctive themes, and that we will be able to inspire conversations in one network with the results of discussion from another.

Topics and issues will arise spontaneously but here are a few that I hope we will examine:

- Types of organisational and personal change
- Higher education institutions as environments for change
- Envisioning and communicating change
- Leading and championing change
- Planning for change
- Creating conditions for emergent change
- Facilitating and supporting change processes
- Engaging colleagues in change processes
- Taking and managing risks
- The role of brokerage and other forms of change agency in change processes
- Barriers and resistances to change and how they are overcome

- Creating evidence for change
- Evaluating the effects of complex change processes
- Decision making in complex change processes
- Principles to guide us in our thinking and practice

I am sure that you can add many more topics and I hope you will.

Beliefs, values and ethics – I recently participated in a seminar organised by the Council for Industry in Higher Education which examined values and ethics in contemporary higher education and I came away thinking about how could we contribute to what is clearly an important and timely debate. There was lots of talk about the need to articulate the values and ethical principles that guide our decisions and behaviours and a recognition of the need for conversation to grow this understanding.

The choice of what is right and wrong is a central issue in organisational and personal decisions about change. Much of our engagement with change is rooted directly or indirectly in the fundamental moral purpose of education ‘to make a difference to students’ lives’ (Fullan, 1993). ‘Moral purpose sets decision-making (and behaviours and actions) in a framework of values that take the wider community and wider context into consideration, including the future context and the spiritual dimension... The underlying question is that of the values that dictate the choice’ (McCluskey, 2004). Making complex changes involves all sorts of choices and decisions made at the organisational level that may conflict with what we believe and value as individuals. This is the source of much discomfort and anxiety in many organisational change processes.

In our conversations about the complex change I would hope that we could consider questions like:

- What belief and value systems underlie our desires for change, our conceptions of change, our decisions about what to change and our actions for change?
- What sorts of ethical issues do we encounter in our change processes and how do we resolve them?

If we can engage with these sorts of questions then we will make a valuable contribution to the debate on values and ethics in higher education.

Some thoughts on change

In approaching this topic we need to establish a framework that is inclusive in its conceptions of change. **There are many ways of thinking about change** and for any change situation one or more of these ways of thinking might be drawn upon. For some situations rational linear ways of thinking about the causes and effects of change might be appropriate. But for complex change projects cause and effect are not so easy to establish and more flexible ways of thinking, that are responsive to whatever emerges from planned actions (including seemingly irrational responses of many different participants in the change process), are more useful.

Complex change is complicated because it comprises many elements or interconnected parts whose relationships and mutual influences are difficult to understand and predict. As if this is not enough complex change often takes place in an environment that is full of other change – everything seems to be moving at once. Entanglement might be an appropriate metaphor (Eoyong and Olson 1998) in which cause and effect are well nigh impossible to establish with any degree of certainty. When planning for change it is helpful to think of higher education institutions as large, complex social systems which continually change (adapt/invent) in spontaneous and unpredictable ways through the everyday conversations, relationships and interactions of people. New patterns of behaviour (new practices) tend to emerge through social interaction rather than through the grand designs of managerial architects.

Change involves changing and institutional projects for change will only be successful if they help people to change. Similarly, the plans for change that are so carefully crafted are also likely to change as they are implemented and people learn that what they need to do to change is not what they anticipated. **Complex change that is also transformational** involves changing conditions, thinking, attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, values and culture.

What is change?

It might be any or all of these things:

- New materials / things.
- New behaviour / practices.
- New beliefs / ways of thinking / understanding / feeling.

Basically change is something that is different to what has been.

Change includes the process ideas of:

- Inventing something new.
- Making something different – transforming / adapting / converting something that already exists.
- Replacing or exchanging something – substitution.
- Becoming different.

Change can involve some or all of these things:

- Abandoning something that is not working.
- Doing existing things better / more efficiently.
- Making better use of something.
- Expanding something that is considered to be desirable.
- Adding new things to existing things.
- Connecting things to make different things.
- Doing entirely new things which replace or complement existing things.
- Or it might be an improved capacity to do something different or new in the future.

The concept of change includes the idea of enhancement which is generally understood as improving something that is already pretty good. But our perceptions of whether a change is an enhancement are bound up with the process of changing. They are highly personal and context dependent. Perceptions will be influenced by such factors as:

- The reasons for change (imposed or self-determined).
- The scale (quantity/amount of difference).
- The quality (characteristics of difference).
- The time (rate at which a difference is created e.g. slow incremental or rapid radical).
- Whether the benefits outweigh the investment made in terms of personal time and costs.
- Whether changing is a solitary or collaborative activity.
- Whether it is supported/unsupported.
- Whether it is valued by students, colleagues and managers.
- The amount of pain being suffered as we change.

Not surprisingly, the idea that a particular change or intended change is an improvement is often contested. This creates difficulties when we come to evaluation. Evaluation is particularly difficult when changes happen in many different ways, for different reasons, in different contexts, at different rates, over different time scales and when the effects in one area of change start modifying practice, behaviour or thinking in another area of change – probably the norm in many HE environments.

Physical changes or changes in conditions are usually easy to spot. Behavioural changes may or may not be easy to recognise but changes in thinking, attitudes and beliefs which may result in behavioural changes are not so easy to recognise and quantify. When personal factors are also taken into consideration - like self-awareness of the effects of change, personal experience and interpretations of cause and effect - it is not surprising that perceptions of change are unique to each individual experiencing it.

There can be few experiences as emotional as change. Some of the feelings experienced by the Team Leaders in the 2004 Change Academy are given below. It is noticeable that there are more negative associations than positive ones and that negative attitudes are probably dominant for most people.

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| <i>Positive associations</i> | <i>Negative associations</i> |
| Excitement | Fear |
| Transformation | Resistance |
| Adrenaline | Threat |
| Improvement | Disimprovement |
| Challenge | Chaos |
| Energised | Confusion |
| Sense of achievement | Management speak |
| Relief | Denial "Wake me up when it's over ..." |
| | Weariness - exhaustion |
| | Change for change sake ... |
| | Sceptical of reasons for and benefits of... |
| | Sense of loss - bereavement |
| | Pain |
| | Uncertainty - Insecurity |
| | Demoralised |

Why do people change?

Change is motivated by all sorts of reasons – some intrinsic because we want to or believe we have to and others extrinsic because other people want us to. Some perceptions of Change Academy Team Leaders are given below. What reasons have caused you or your organisation to change?

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>At a personal level</i> | <i>At the organisational level</i> |
| We change for our own growth, development and betterment | Because the environment changes |
| Self-improvement (intellectual, corporate, personal) | To adapt to external change |
| Lack of change is death | To respond to external influence – not always for the good |
| Self-improvement | Because of external regulation |
| To keep up-to-date | To be more competitive |
| To keep ahead of the game | To stay ahead of the competition |
| To create a better future | To reflect needs / wants of people other than ourselves |
| To avoid pain | Someone at the top says we have to do it! |
| To control our environment / life | To make a difference |
| To adapt as we learn from experience | Part of the ongoing planning and review process |
| Personal advancement | To respond to new challenges |
| To accommodate things eg external change | As new people come in they change the organisation to suit themselves |
| When we acquire new responsibilities | To expand good practice |
| To acquire power or influence | To create new opportunities for ourselves |
| To achieve a goal | Part of the management enterprise e.g. goal setting – restructuring – improved efficiency |
| Just seems the right thing to do! | Because managers need to show they are doing/changing things |
| Because we have to | |
| Under the influence of extrinsic or intrinsic drivers | |

Taken at face value these perceptions of Change Academy Team Leaders suggest that we have more positive feelings / associations about change if we determine it rather than if it is driven by our organisations or external forces.

Why do HE institutions engage in self-determined change?

Based on the reasons given for the 2004 Change Academy projects, universities and colleges are engaging in self-determined complex change because:

- they recognise that what they are doing may no longer be the right thing to do;
- they recognise that there are better / different ways of doing something;
- they want to do entirely new things;

- they can connect and integrate things that have previously not been connected;
- they want to change the way people think and behave so that new, as yet unimagined, things are possible;
- they want to reposition themselves / grow or achieve greater alignment / cohesion within their strategic ambitions;
- they want to improve their reputation.

The specific change initiatives described in plans are often nested within an organisational strategic plan or vision and they have grown out of self-review or belief that it is necessary change in some way.

Higher education institutions as complex organizational environments for change.

We might believe that universities and colleges have particular characteristics that set them apart from other sorts of organization but **are they inherently more complex or difficult organisational environments in which to accomplish complex change than other sorts of organisation?** The question - **What are the organisational characteristics and dynamics of higher education institutions that have a bearing on the way change happens?** might provide a good starting point for our discussion.

Are there levels of change and difficulty in changing?

Change is accomplished at many different scales: small scale, incremental changes can be accomplished more easily and more quickly than larger more complex changes that require many connected things to change.

Improvement- seeking change embraces all scales from small, incremental change to large scale transformational change and invention. The figure below represents change in terms of seven levels of difficulty and complexity. A number of propositions can be derived from this framework.

Types of change and increasing levels of difficulty (from 1 to 7) in changing. Source: School for Innovators (<http://www.thinking-expedition.com/change7.html>).

| | | |
|---|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Effectiveness | Doing the right things |
| 2 | Efficiency | Doing things right |
| 3 | Improving | Doing things better |
| 4 | Cutting | Stopping doing things |
| 5 | Copying | Doing things other people are doing |
| 6 | Different | Doing things no one else is doing |
| 7 | Impossible | Doing things that can't be done |

- Innovation is primarily concerned with levels 6 and 7.
- Much enhancement in higher education is concerned with levels 1-4. It is a continuous and natural process for many teachers and others who support students' learning.
- The notion of spreading good or best practice broadly equates with copying *and adapting*. Its position at level 5 tells us that it is a hard thing for someone to take an imaginative idea that someone has learnt to turn into good educational practice in one context, and transfer it by learning how to do it in another context. What is fundamentally underestimated in the idea of dissemination is the personal investment (time and intellectual effort) required to convert someone else's ideas and knowledge into your own. It is not therefore surprising that the transfer of 'good practice' is not a simple or easy matter as dissemination sometimes implies.
- The reform agenda for higher education increasingly pushes teachers and institutions to the levels of change that are most difficult to accomplish. This is compounded by QA environments that discourage

risk taking and work environments that are unable to provide the space and time for individuals and groups of individuals to think through and make these changes.

The higher we go through the innovation scale of change the greater the risk that the intervention will not result in improvement but the greater the potential gains if it does. Working with risk is an important feature of transformative change: one that is not associated with more incremental forms of change.

The experience of organisational change

Learning about organisational change is primarily an experiential process. Poor experiences of change make us more resistant to change in future. Some of the experiences of Change Academy Team Leaders are captured below.

| <i>Some characteristics of least successful change enterprises experienced by participants</i> | <i>Some characteristics of more successful change enterprises experienced by participants</i> |
|---|--|
| These things increase negative beliefs about organisational change. | These things decrease the negative beliefs about organisational change |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ External imposition of change ➤ Change dictated top down ➤ Chaotic ➤ Scale of change – too great to manage ➤ Speed of change – too fast to absorb ➤ No opportunity for veto or negotiation ➤ Actions of leaders don't follow their words ➤ No staff ownership/inadequate ownership ➤ Structural / superficial with no underlying logic or convincing rationale ➤ Incompetence ➤ No time for embedding before the next lot of change ➤ People scared of the change ➤ Key people not delivering ➤ Change ignored ➤ Assumptions not made explicit and tested ➤ Poor evaluation ➤ No understanding of why ➤ Poor leadership ➤ No ownership ➤ Dithering – poor decision making ➤ Lack of clarity of purpose ➤ Muddled goals ➤ Reasons for change conflict with personal values | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Genuine involvement ➤ Sense that change is connected to values and beliefs ➤ Good honest communication ➤ Sense of ownership ➤ Quick wins – makes you feel good ➤ Internal generation of ideas ➤ Positive at the start ➤ Good leadership willing to take risks ➤ Distributed leadership – many people involved in 'leading' ➤ Long term change resulting from distributed leadership ➤ Involvement of sceptics in process often the most committed when they are convinced ➤ Leaders taking responsibility who are accountable ➤ Enjoyment ➤ Importance of students ➤ Common Goals ➤ Clear aims & objectives ➤ Change reduces rather than increases workload ➤ Change brings tangible benefit ➤ Shared understanding of reasons for change ➤ Shared ambitions and visions ➤ Stakeholders involved |

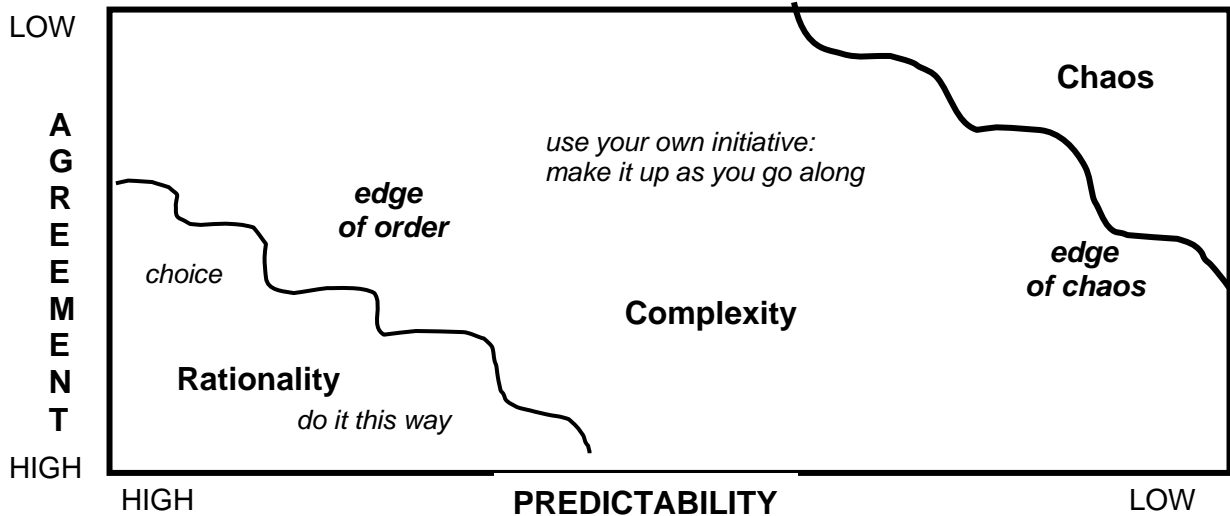
Organisational change is complexity in action

Higher education institutions are large, complex, adaptive social systems. A *'complex adaptive system consists of a large number of agents, each of which behaves according to its own principles of local interaction. No individual agent (eg teacher or administrator), or group of agents (e.g. teaching team or department) determines the patterns of behaviour that the system as a whole displays, or how these patterns evolve, and neither does anything outside the system'* (Stacey 2000).

Those responsible for creating improvement strategies and for supporting improvement have to be aware of, and sympathetic to, the complexity of change and changing. They must be conscious of the way in which social systems like teaching teams and departments self-organise in response to change in ways that are often unpredictable and which might appear illogical to those sitting outside the actual environment in which change is happening. They need to be aware of the inherent paradox and contradictions in the plethora of

policies, strategies and support mechanisms that seek improvement and of the nature of learning that emerges through changing. It is necessary for individuals and teams to invent their own wheels in order to understand and take ownership of change to gain improvement. In short, those responsible for promoting and supporting improvement need to be aware that where people work is primarily at what Fullan (2003) calls the *edge of order* i.e. somewhere between the world where things make sense from a managerial perspective and the world where anarchy prevails. In the organisational change literature this world is known as the *edge of chaos* (Stacey, 2000): the place which most people occupy most of their working lives. We can use Stacey's agreement-uncertainty matrix to visualise decision making in this world of complexity.

A way of looking at change through the agreement – certainty matrix of Stacey (2000)



Evaluating change in complex adaptive systems

Notes taken from Eoyong and Olson (1998) Evaluating Performance in a Complex Adaptive System

Most evaluation processes are based on performance against predicted goals. Historically, evaluation programs were developed to work in organizations that were assumed to be closed, stable and predictable. And in many situations, linear, low-dimension evaluation systems provided adequate data to represent organizational performance approximately. Such evaluation approaches are close enough to meet the needs of organizations. But recent research in organizational management, behavior and psychology indicate that human systems behave as complex adaptive systems. Organizational systems that were once stable are moving outside the range of linear, predictable behaviors and entering into the regime of chaotic or complex adaptive behavior. Prediction and controlled performance toward a goal, like those assumed by traditional evaluation methods, cannot be expected from a complex adaptive system (CAS). For this reason, new tools, techniques and methods must be designed to meet the needs of constituencies that request evaluation of organizations while they are in the more dynamic phases of complex adaptation. Recent research reflects two approaches to applications of complexity in the evaluation of human systems. The first focuses on new descriptions of the evaluation process. It pulls metaphors from various CAS applications to explain the evaluation process as emergent and complex. As heuristic tools, these studies may encourage constructive conversations about the roles and strategies of program evaluation. The second approach provides new measurement techniques to support data collection and analysis in complex systems. The most promising of these techniques is nonlinear time series analysis, which allows the evaluator to investigate patterns of behavior that emerge in a complex system over time.

Evaluation of complex organisational change is an important issue in UK higher education. Recent searches for institutional evaluation studies relating to the implementation of personal development planning have revealed that such data is generally lacking in spite of the considerable efforts to

develop policy and practice across the UK (Jackson et al 2004). Our ability to develop far exceeds our ability to evaluate the effectiveness of what we develop. Evaluation is often given a low priority and is under-resourced in many change initiatives yet the use of evaluation is critical to helping complex adaptive human systems understand better the changes they need to make as they are evolving. **A key question for our network discussion is how do we evaluate complex change in order to accomplish it?**

So what sorts of things do we want to learn through this network discussion?

The process of learning should be driven by what you want to learn. The questions you ask and the responses they provoke will be the engine for learning. Here are some of the things I hope we will learn.

- Develop and expand our theoretical/conceptual understanding of how institutions accomplish complex change – what theoretical models offer the best explanations?
- Test the propositions embedded in this paper that universities behave as complex adaptive systems and examine our change practices from this perspective.
- Develop new understandings of:
 - The sorts of processes and interactions that lead to successful institutional change! Are there generic principles that can be extracted from real examples?
 - The social dynamics of change. How do groups of people coordinate their efforts to plan and engage institutions in change?
 - The role of leaders in complex change processes. Who leads and how do they do it?
 - The beliefs and values underlying the changes we make. How does individual and collective conscience influence choice and behaviour?
 - How we try to evaluate complex change. What instruments and measures do we use?
 - How we make sense of change. What theories of change underlie our plans and interventions?

If you would like to contribute a story or case study on how you or your institution have been involved in change please contact me – personal stories are essential to the development of situated knowledge about change. Such stories are particularly valuable if they contain evidence to substantiate conclusions and theories. Alternatively, you might want to provide a short reflective piece in which you share your own theories of change.

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