A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS: MEETINGS AS RITUAL IN THE CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

DR DAWN FRANCIS
JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY
CAIRNS CAMPUS
PO BOX 6811, CAIRNS
Q. 4870
FAX 070 509490

ABSTRACT

Meetings in institutional contexts can reproduce or transform cultural conventions. This research examines the interaction occurring in meetings in a tertiary institution with a staff from different cultural backgrounds. Meetings are framed as ritual; stereotypic, quasi dramatic, repetitive behaviours which persevere and are valued regardless of what is actually achieved. Having access to prestigious forms of knowledge, along with the prerogative to determine which knowledge and discourse types may be legitimately drawn upon in the meeting frame, allows those with power to determine the rules of the game. Perhaps more importantly, it allows them to treat these rules, once normalised, in a more flexible way than less powerful participants. Those who have communication competence as defined within this frame, not only exercise influence, but determine others ability to do so. Non-participants collude with this with their silence. Collusion sustains existing perceptions of power, knowledge and competence.

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This study is set in a developing country where I had been posted as a curriculum consultant. The tertiary institution in which the meetings occurred had an academic staff of twenty-seven from seven different countries. Of these staff, fourteen were nationals. In this context I had listened to my national colleagues' animated talk about a need to change the content and style of curriculum presentation. I had heard
staff embrace the policy of participatory decision-making and felt the good-will that surrounded their interactions on a day to day basis. Still, when we entered formal meetings, nationals often accepted in silence decisions which were counter to the positions they had put to me in informal contexts. In formal meetings they became a participating but powerless audience.

While this study illuminates a particular context, and some of the patterns identified are intensified by difficulties in cross-cultural communication, I believe that anyone who has participated in institutional meetings will identify themes that are both familiar and problematic. If we conceptualise formal meetings as ritual, we can begin to deconstruct the collusion between audience and actors which sustains an image of participation and unity while maintaining an organisational mono-culture that is neither adaptive nor consistently productive.

Adopting a Theoretical Position
When I first began collecting data from the formal meetings, I delved into the voluminous literature about decision-making and was disturbed by the reductionist nature of the models generated. Most had a rational base and assumed that decision-makers faced clearly defined problems. They assumed a rational weighing and ranking of priorities to determine a "best" solution. None of this seemed to reflect the meetings I attended where information was limited and not available equally to all participants. Rarely did I see time given to the generation of alternatives. Nowhere in this rationality could I fit the personal biographies, motivations, beliefs about self and others and the often tacit, sometimes explicit agendas which determined who influenced others and what knowledge would be valued. Rational models of decision-making ignore interpersonal relationships, conflict styles, value systems, needs and wants which create the meaning that participants bring to and take from meetings. They also remove decision-making from the cultures, structures and environment in which they are embedded. Thus, despite the proliferation of models, I could not find in the literature the kind of knowledge or theoretical framework needed to give meaning to the way humans interact in institutional meetings.

Another aspect of the literature bothered me. The theory of organisations treats the institution as if it is a single, uniform entity with an existence separate not only from the individuals and groups within it, but also from the multifaceted social world in which it is founded. Despite Mintzberg's (1983 : 8) claim that: management theory has done an about face (...) from the notion of given organisational goals to that of fluid power in and around the organisation with no set goals, from an organisation devoid of influences to one in which virtually everyone is an influence, from the view of the organisation as society's instrument to that of it as a political arena...

I could not locate in the existing theory any consideration the ways
local knowledge is used in the negotiation of decision-making meetings. Rejecting the rational theories of management and organisations, I moved to draw on a symbolic interactionist view that social actors constantly construct and negotiate interactions focusing on processes and subjectivities as much as structures, roles and goals. In this context the nationals and their expatriate colleagues collude in establishing a definition of the meeting which supports the rhetoric of participation while maintaining a status quo in which nationals, while not totally silent, continue to have little influence. I argue that the symbols and mystery of the meeting ritual have to be laid out and systematically probed if nationals, or any others without voice, are to become active partners rather than audience.

Meetings as Ritual Performance
A comment by a staff member watching people hurrying to a meeting captures the meaning of meetings as ritual. Those people don't need to [be] committed but they do need to be present. A few go to be heard. The others just spectate. When someone is going to talk, you will know just what sort of thing he is going to say. It doesn't really matter if the problem is solved or a decision is made. The decisions are already made but the normal performers must do their set ways and then we all go away with our diverse thinkings but do what needs to be done, as it was known it would be done. That is what meetings are about (National’s comment made while watching people arrive at a meeting, 1988). Schwartzman (1987, 272) identifies three approaches to the study of meetings: (i) as a tool for the study of other topics; (ii) as a symptom of, or a cure for, a variety of organisational ills; or (iii) the meeting becomes the topic of the research. She saw few studies existing in the latter category. This study began with the first approach. I wanted to understand the silence of nationals in decision-making and meetings provided the context for observation. Like Schwartzman, I came to believe that the meeting can reproduce or transform cultural conventions and its construction should be a key foci. My theory of meetings as a ritual captured the essence of the cultural conventions I saw sustaining nationals’ non-participation in decision-making.

Like other members I spent a great deal of time at meetings in the institution and it did not take long to learn to anticipate accurately the form, process and outcomes of the various committees. Like most others I learned to predict who would speak and what their position on an issue would be. While each committee had its own emotional climate and symbolic form, depending in part on the approach taken by the chairperson, each was equally predictable. As an observer, sometimes operating a video camera and other times placing myself outside the circle to take notes, I found that I could alter the position of the camera, or move on a check-list accurately, in advance of speaking
At the beginning of my second field visit I made this entry in my field journal prior to a Curriculum Committee meeting:

Off to another ritual performance. I find it hard to look with fresh eyes and even harder to ask, ‘What is happening here?’ I seem to have a mental image that it is almost stereotypic. I must move to challenge this early fixing of my perception.

Despite this self-caution I increasingly framed meetings as “ritual performance”. While in the field I did not analyse what it was about meetings that caused me to use those words. We simply seemed to think, feel and do the same things on each occasion. As I became aware that I was viewing meetings in the way I had labelled them, I constructed check-lists to focus on examples which might challenge this concept. While some disconfirming evidence indicating that change could be achieved was located, it’s scarcity strengthened my notion of ritual performance: repetitive, symbolic and sustaining the knowledge-power relationships maintaining the status quo.

Early in my text construction my attention was drawn to McLaren’s (1986) framing of schooling as ritual performance. I accepted elements of his definition but I felt uncomfortable with his insistence that scholars situate their work in critical discourse in which macro-social concepts of class, power and hegemony predominate. While I moved closer to his critical ethnographer’s stance as my study progressed, my emerging theory of collusion and the potential for dismantling it, diverged from those which used the language of domination, hegemony and empowerment.

McLaren’s work led me back to the literature and alerted me to a growing body of work using ritual as a framework. I accepted his use of earlier studies (Geertz, 1966; Grimes, 1982; Turner, 1980), re-evaluating the conventional anthropological view of ritual as bounded, frozen acts. However, I found that his attempt to reach a “strict definition” (1986: 45) by summarising twenty-two characteristics of ritual from the literature did not provide the “backcloth” of theoretical assumptions promised. Stripped of indicators of context and phrased in the jargon of scholars from a number of different disciplines, McLaren’s definitions of ritual lacked the coherent linkages necessary to establish functional relationships between the elements I identified. The definitions, both hard and soft, are left to stand apart from his thick description which more clearly illustrates the ritual elements of schooling. My use of ritual, both in terms of context and the characteristics identified, is closer to that of Davis (1981) and Hinton (1989) who argue that analyses of ritual have been overly concerned with the symbolic aspects, overlooking the stereotypic, quasi-dramatic elements central to repetitive behaviours which persevere and are valued regardless of what is actually achieved.

In framing meetings as ritual performance I focussed on those key elements of ritual I observed during institutional meetings. These were: repetitive, stereotypic performance; theatre; mystery to be
penetrated; construction of a framing device for a display of status and, construction of a framing device for validation of cultural beliefs. Each of these can be linked to my theory of collusion to maintain the status quo.

Repetitive, Stereotypic Performance

Repetition was the aspect of meetings which first led me to the notion of ritual. It remained the most powerful as data confirmed that patterns of procedure and behaviour were maintained regardless of the outcome of those meetings. All of the meetings observed had a recognisable pattern in which five frames could be identified. These were: pre-meeting informal talk, opening statement, cycles of agenda items presented as business, closing statement and subsequent post mortems. Regardless of the language used, the context, the degree of formality, or who was in attendance, I could recognise the point at which informal talk became “the real meeting” and that at which business was concluded and informal talk resumed. As with all rituals, the beginning depends on the key participants, those who are believed to have special knowledge of the content and form of the meeting being present and ready, and their signalling this to other participants. Within this repetitive framing I observed individual patterning of constantly repeated ideas, information and behaviour. In part this was related to the number of vertical and horizontal layers in the institution’s structure which meant that the same items could be on the agenda at committee meetings of subject groups, staff, curriculum review, academic advisory and governing council levels. The same people could be present at three or more of these. Given that the total composition of the meeting differed each time, individuals feeling they had important information or positions to put would do so at each successive level. However, this only partly explained the predicable. As in theatre, particular characters were recognisable because of their personal style and the consistency with which they projected certain values. A striking example of this was the regular parody of minutes of meetings entitled, "Extraordinary Staff Meeting" which captured the behaviour that all staff members perceived as ordinary. Here, every character is stereotyped and instantly recognisable to all members of the community, whether or not they had participated in the particular meeting being parodied. The most interesting aspect of this for me was not that the characters and the content with which they concerned themselves was so accurate, but that the writer assumed that a common understanding was shared about the roles played and impact that individuals had on the meeting. The correctness of this assumption was confirmed by the laughter and subsequent additional examples to the minutes which were generated as the items were shared. The regular appearance of minutes from these “Extra-ordinary Staff Meetings” and the good humoured sharing of the items from the agenda did nothing to alter the behaviour of the characters parodied as they participated in subsequent meetings. Some even drew the writer’s attention to activity which would enable elaboration of the stereotypic characterisation of themselves. Those who did not speak at meetings
were non-persons. They did not appear in the parodies and their presence was never raised in the informal joking and teasing that accompanied the release of “Extra-ordinary” minutes.

Theatre
A staff member used the term “spectate” in describing the role of “ordinary members”. This raised for me the elements of theatre present in ritual performance. Certainly there were spectators who rarely spoke, but whose presence as audience was intrinsic to the performance.

The emotional climate established in the meetings cannot be taken for granted. It has to be worked at constantly by the key players and accepted by the audience. Close analysis of the performance of the Principal shows how he worked at appealing to other key players and the general audience, always carefully establishing the prescribed text after others have been invited to extemporise.

An outsider to the institution, whom I shall call Marcia, raised an issue that I had heard members of staff discuss on several occasions. The general consensus seemed to be that there was too much time given to testing.

Marcia: Perhaps we need to cut down on the number of assignments and tests and focus more attention on the students' needs. How often does a lecturer find a group after three o'clock, sit down and go through areas they are weak in. They are too busy marking...

Principal: That point is well taken and among our senior staff we are concerned there are students who are weak... who are shy to approach a lecturer, or even if a lecturer seeks them out are too shy to talk. There are problems like that.

( Francis, 1992, 411 )
This shows very clever use of veiled speech. Marcia, raising an issue known to be counter to existing policy valued by the key players, is praised by the words, "that point is well taken." However, the response is tangential to the issue and deals only with that part of it which can be shown to be well catered for in existing practice. Also, the issue has been changed from one of over assessment (Marcia's point) to one of ways of dealing with weak students. It is this latter issue which the Principal wishes the meeting to address. By smoothly and skilfully operating within the genre set up for discussion within this group, the Principal has not only created a focus within which he can present his own information but has also controlled others' ability to do so. Words are of great importance in the theatrical dimensions of ritual. Delivery style as well as the words spoken must be constructed to appeal to the audience or, failing this, to at least silence them so that they do not detract from the prescribed text and the intended message. Successful key players can orchestrate audience
participation to enhance personal performance. Less successful players gain the floor but can not so readily focus audience attention and affect on those aspects of the delivery which suit their values and purpose.

As with any piece of theatre there were hidden messages to be interpreted, reproduced and debated in talk beyond the performance. Each participant, whether as player or audience, could reflect on his/her own interpretation as well as the way it fitted with others and, most importantly, with that of the key players.

Mystery to be Penetrated

Some ritual theorists (Beck, 1978; Babcock, 1978; Moore and Myerhoff, 1977) question the application of ritual to secular everyday events, claiming that they lack both mystical reciprocity between man and divine being and the necessary deep involvement of the inner person in attempts to establish reciprocity. Others (Benjamin, 1978; Davis, 1981; Hinton, 1989) do not separate sacred and secular. Hinton, (1989: 17) answers the question of how something which is stereotypic, everyday and very ordinary, can also be mysterious with an account of the banality surrounding the sacred agricultural ceremonies of the Karin:

the officiant uses words like: ‘Rice grow tall and white, insects keep away and rain do not continue too long otherwise my rice will rot.’ While he will repeat these words in as many languages as he knows, there is no sense of mystery or poetry. And while he is doing his job, people talk and laugh loudly, old men cough and spit, and dogs try to steal the offering of chicken or pork. So, the sacred can be banal. This does not deny the importance of the belief the Karin attach to the ceremony. The audience does not need to penetrate the meaning of the incantation or to actively participate in it as anything other than audience to maintain the belief. In so doing they increase the importance of those who are believed to have knowledge of the incantation and the right to interpret its outcome.

In this sense meetings are both banal and a mystery to be penetrated by those who have access to special knowledge. Ordinary words are used in special ways. These ways are known by those who have mastered their use to have maximum impact on others. Others are significant in that they anticipate a predictable outcome as a matter of habit. They do not question the processes or events underpinning their belief. Some will be content to remain as audience while others, particularly those adopted as proteges of the masters of the ceremony, will learn the secrets and carry on the mystery.

The ritual mysteries of institutional meetings occur at the levels of structure, knowledge and process. Institutional ideology (Blum and McHugh, 1971; Meyer and Rowan, 1983; 1983b; Popkewitz, 1987; 1988) is built around the labels in the structure. In this institution, vocabulary such as “curriculum review,” “academic review” and the higher level “advisory and “governing” which are associated with the committee structure are analogous to the vocabulary of efficiency and a
rational, productivity-oriented motive. Pressures from funding bodies outside the country, and within the central administration, put a high priority on efficient management of limited resources and on courses being objectively and rationally organised and assessed. In the wider context this could be seen in common procedures set up for testing at all levels, the carefully sequenced curriculum and in the regular ritual of national rating conferences. Concern for efficiency, moderation across provinces and accountability were the very fabric of the education system. The labels used within the institution reflected this. They are constituted to publicly account for the diverse (and not necessarily consensual) activities of individuals within the organisation. Meyer and Rowan (1983; 1983b) rightly claim that the creation of such ideology is necessary to the continued flow of support and to protection of the organisation from claims of negligence or irrationality. Providing the correct labels legitimates the organisation’s work in the eyes of the consumers and internal participants by providing a way of documenting “efficiency.” The bodies sustained by the labels generate their own work and their own myths regardless of whether they serve the functions for which they were created. For example, the Curriculum Committee set up to facilitate the writing of curriculum, was viewed by participants as a barrier to nationals’ writing, and yet it was the hardest working, most time-consuming committee within the structure. Similarly, the formal structure celebrating the ideology of efficiency did not need to be consistent with its effect. There was much duplication of effort, overlapping of responsibilities and redundancy in the activities of the different committees but this did not negate the ritual significance of the labels or the activity attached to them. The most consistent theme in the data concerned the valuing of knowledge and the way in which individuals differed in giving meaning to what counts as knowledge. Observations of meetings inevitably raised problems of analysing the unseen rules and understandings used to distinguish between that knowledge taken to be authoritative and that which had little influence. My key informants could name individuals who gave much information and who raised important questions but had little influence.

In an attempt to illuminate this, I moved to quantitative analysis of topic control, talk generated and subsequent influence. The context here was a general staff meeting, chaired by a national, to plan a professional development program for staff. Table 1 resulted. I saw three factors as important here. First, expatriates using their first language and familiar meeting procedures, generate more ideas and claim greater share of topic control (this is taken up in depth in Francis, 1992). Second, ideas supported by a number of reasons engage others in debate of the idea. Third, ideas so put have greater potential to influence action.

Table 1: Topic Control, Talk Generated and Subsequent Influence
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic Generated</th>
<th>No of Words in Initiation</th>
<th>No. of Supporting Reasons</th>
<th>Follow-Ups Generated</th>
<th>Initiated By Used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of outside experts</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Expat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference reports</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Expat</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printery excursion</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Expat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV studio excursion</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Expat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers</td>
<td>753</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Expat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 6 exam</td>
<td>644</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Expat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production of written material</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Expat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library use</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nat'l</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student motivation</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Nat'l</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University researcher</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Expat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Update for staff</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Nat'l</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading levels</td>
<td>854</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Expat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course writing</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Expat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulletin boards</td>
<td>904</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Non-Nat'l</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Expat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I had other queries about the ways in which knowledge, and subsequently power, was symbolically mediated by language. In both sender and receiver, perceived power, status, competence and attraction depended at least in part upon the ability of individuals to control the symbols used. Laha and James were each perceived to possess valuable, relevant knowledge and yet James consistently was seen to have more power and greater influence over decisions made at meetings. In part this difference related to James' ability to use the language of meetings. No person with poor English skills was perceived to be powerful in this context. More subtle, but equally cogent, was ability to use formal symbolic structures like meetings to shape the beliefs of others and to determine how accessible the knowledge held will be to others. Also, awareness of which knowledge source to draw on in support of a case was critical to gaining support. The Principal was a master of this, being able to quote student cases, demands from the administration, staff as a corporate body, or individual influential staff members, in order to gain swift acceptance of desired decisions at all levels. Thus he prefaced a motion to Governing Council with the words, “Curriculum Committee have agreed that (...).” Information included was selective, focussing on issues supporting the decision and deleting any questions raised or cautions expressed in previous committee discussion. Different aspects of the case were stressed depending on the audience. Moving in the other direction he could quote higher governing bodies in requesting action from staff. Thus the initiate within the ritual performance had to penetrate not only the mystery of the symbols used but the labels and processes which determine the way in which those symbols will be interpreted.

Construction of a Framing Device for Validation of Status

I have stressed that the greater the difficulty participants in ritual
have in penetrating the esoteric knowledge of the key players, the
greater the status of those players. However, validation of status extends beyond access to knowledge. Schwartzman (1987) in her move
towards developing a theory of meetings, draws attention to the
literature (Bloch, 1971; Duranti, 1984; Hanson-Berman, 1985; Salmond,
1976; Wolcott, 1973) which indicates that the meeting becomes a primary context for proclaiming and reinforcing social status and position
because:
acceptance of the form requires, at least in part, acceptance of the
current social and cultural order (Bloch, 1975). A formal meeting
requires the negotiation and ultimately the acceptance of a set of
social relationships that define the right to arrange a meeting, to
establish a set of rules and conventions for ordering and regulating
talk and the recognition of this as talk which may be legitimated by
the meeting frame (Schwartzman, 1987: 289).
I saw that meetings in the institution were rarely called by juniors
and that members often judged the importance of both the meeting and
the decision being made by those present (or, often more crucially,
those not present). Meeting dates would be altered if certain
individuals were called elsewhere but would continue in the absence of
other members. Starting times would be altered as Chairperson or
members searched for a person who “should be here” while others could
arrive hours late without causing any disruption. When a meeting was
in competition with other urgent tasks, my key colleagues’ decisions
about attendance most often depended upon who had called the meeting.
Thus individuals could learn about their own and others’ status within
the institution, and at higher level meetings of status outside the
institution, by giving meaning to the way meetings were set up around
specific individuals’ attendance.
Power and influence could not be identified by reference solely to
hierarchical positions in the structure. People with parity in the
substantive level of their individual position had varying amounts of
power and influence. Access to knowledge, access to others who possess
knowledge or power and capacity to rule on precedent could all be
displayed within the frame of business of the meeting. James, a staff
member of long standing and member of higher committee illustrates
this:
The Chairperson has asked for volunteers from staff members to present
subject outlines for review. He wants a time line established. James
wants staff kept to established planning formats which he has devised
and uses easily:

Chair: Can anyone promise //

James: (overspeaking) Well, it depends ... depends on a couple of
people... need to be restructured, worked upon because we (Curriculum
Committee) thought they were going up the wrong tree. They really
have to be looked at.
Chair: (Ignoring James and speaking directly to a staff member thought to be ready) How much work on yours? Can you be ready?

Abdul: Do you want it all...Folders? ... workshop activities?

Chair: No. We don't need ... (looks at James)

James: I think it should all be put down here (points to the table). Then everyone sees all the steps have been gone through. Then the Academic Advisory Committee can't say, "You're not doing the job". It would allow us to monitor across the board. (...) One of the things we want to do is decide on a format, how it's to be presented, all tests, topics, so it's systematised.

Chair: (ok.) Folders. Well, how much can we handle? Can we get through two?

James: It's not a matter of when they can be written, but of getting them properly prepared (Francis, 1992, 397)

James is controlling the floor here by his vocality, his knowledge of the higher Academic Advisory Committee, and by the Chairperson's deferral to him. He uses his knowledge of the system (and others relative lack of knowledge) to persuade the meeting to do things in the manner he believes they should be done.

At the lower levels of the structure this acted to consolidate already established perceptions of status and power. At higher levels in the meeting hierarchy where there were more people with formally endorsed positions, there was more juggling of status as individuals used their specialised department knowledge to negotiate a place in the status system.

Within these dimensions, questions and supporting comments were often used to reaffirm alliances. Typical of this was the often repeated drawing of lines as "long-timers" (people who had been in the institution a long time, represented here by Jo and Bill) defended the assessment policy from attack by numerous colleagues (represented here by Ken, Laha and Ester) who wanted change:

Laha: Does this question our policy of continuous assessment?
Jo: It comes at the end when they must put all of their understanding together and apply it.
Ken: Is it application of skills or acquisition of knowledge that is tested?
Bill: It can be compared with a driver's licence test. You go at the end. You've got your permit ... been through each lesson.
Ester: Students raised this in my tutorial. They are angry. Why is it that pass or fail depends on one test?
Jo: It encourages cumulative learning. What they knew then is of no use if it can't be used now.
Laha: That drives home my point about us being assessment driven.
Ken: I agree with Laha. They get a certificate because they meet
criteria set by objectives which must be measurable. We need to
examine this concern for the evaluation task. It’s turning us to
preoccupation with courses, not concern for the students.
Here an alliance is confirmed between Jo and Bill within the context of
a familiar debate as others combine to challenge them on the specific
issue of a test. This item of business allows them to express private
conflicts and potentially hostile sentiments in the socially acceptable
guise of business of a meeting. Each person brings to the alliances
different degrees of emotional tension, meaning and motives. Ester
wants her tutorial group's anger appeased. Ken's subject area and
personal philosophy is at odds with Jo's behaviourist approach to
objectives and testing. Laha wants to resist the power play of
long-timers who in turn see themselves as maintaining standards. Here
there is benign collusion maintaining the status quo by long-timers and
Laha's attempt to challenge being supported a group who normally have
little influence. This occurs in the absence of James who is most
powerful in holding to the position put by the "long timers." Within
this debate a multiplicity of functional meanings can be expressed
before an audience and yet be absorbed into the functionally acceptable
dialogue of agenda business. However, the collusion is not dismantled.
Each participant has their own agenda and these are not made explicit
and thus not subject to scrutiny.

Construction of a Framing Device for Cultural Values

Schwartzman (1987: 289) saw in meetings a setting for the display of
value that American society puts on reason and logic in the development
of decisions and policies. I interpreted the experience of meetings in
this developing country in terms of Western ideologies of individual
management and process-produce rationality that was symbolised by the
labels given to committees. Both the content of the agenda and the behaviours shaping discussion
seemed a validation of cultural beliefs underpinning the industrial
model my key colleagues had constructed (see Francis, 1992) for
expatriates. Content focussed on obtaining formal authority for, and
appreciation of, institutional arrangements. It determined that what
was taught was formally stated and organised in a rational fashion to
achieve preordained objectives. It supported the measurement and
recording of achievement and the cost-effective use of resources. All
of this fitted the intent underpinning the industrial model and
maintained the image of rational efficiency within the institution.
The process also appeared to be one which fitted a communication style
which my national colleagues had labelled as "western" or "industrial".
Individuals spoke for themselves. They were prepared to debate in
public issues not previously negotiated in private. Relationships were
formed by sharing similar ideas on a given issue rather than on family
or group positions. Angry words were tied to ideas, not people. Time
lines were consistently ordered by the outcomes required rather than
group readiness.
The institution used the decisions recorded at meetings to confirm to outsiders that its culture was compatible with that of the field it served. It was held to encourage both the appearance of responsiveness to field demands and to support reassessment of existing practices. The meeting ritual acted to create an image of unity and consensus not unlike that which Popkewitz (1983: 62) saw in coupling scientific management and reform of the Individually Guided Education program in that:

It assumed consensus in school planning, filtering out discussion of the different social interests that compete for dominance in school planning. Further, it obscured the underlying social processes which gave definition to what is learned in school. As a result professional actions give attention to the formal, ritual aspects of organisation, leaving unchallenged the day-to-day social processes that define order, authority and value.

Tension and differing social interests exist in any educational institution and their filtering out at this level may well be important to institutional stability and staff morale. Certainly my observations of life within the institution indicated that grumbling and acts of resistance which occurred were aimed more at maintaining group relationships and making minor changes in the format and content of the instructional program, rather than any collective political push to alter the organisational structure or its focus on efficiency. Resistance was most often effected by delaying the writing of course outlines or by submitting outlines in the required format and maintaining an independent program for teaching. This did not diminish the resistor’s strategic compliance with the rhetoric of logic and efficiency.

My analysis suggests the institutional culture and that of its meetings had preserved the culture of the expatriates. It also implies that culture consists of a set of static beliefs and practices which can be used to identify and explain behaviour and the meaning given to behaviour. Such a view is incompatible with my belief that culture is constantly evolving and that there is interaction between culture and the meanings that people use to interpret experience and generate behaviour. Following McDermott and Gospodinoff (1979) I believe that people across cultures respond to each other, developing meta communicative procedures for altering communicative codes in order to interact with and understand each other, unless there are sound political or economic reasons for doing otherwise. Given this and the multiple voices I heard in the scene, I felt uncomfortable with the idea of a single culture being validated and I searched the videos for instances of nationals’ values being incorporated into the meeting frame. I found that within the rational process being used, individuals across groups were able to use aspects of the communication styles attributed to both models. For example, the non-national Principal and Deputy demonstrated high value placed on the maintenance
of harmony and preservation of the dignity of other people, paying particular attention to the respect due to those whose role demanded it. All participants joined in the repartee following a member's open expression of ignorance. Similarly, argument could be couched in circular talk which touched all bases and gave credence to all views prior to an individual view being expressed. As in the wider non industrial society the meeting became a device for displaying power, but masked that display in overt expressions of respect which reaffirmed reciprocal obligations inherent in the relationships established.

The cultural values of rational efficiency and harmony, viewed by some of my key colleagues as incompatible and belonging to different cultural styles, were blended and used within the meeting context, albeit to support the maintenance of the status quo. The cross cultural experience and the demands of context at any point in time create a "third culture" reality (Malinowski, 1944; Rex, 1959) which transcends that of the parent cultures and reflects the histories, values, systems, motives and current power dispositions of the participants engaged in the interaction. However, even within this third culture, meetings were as ritual.

Western University.


