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Occasional Paper Series

Creating Space for Change

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Consortium for Innovative Environments in Learning

CIEL is a consortium of innovative, progressive institutions with a common focus on interdisciplinary, experiential, student-centered learning. The consortium serves to share best practices and provide mutual support among its members, and to represent the mission and practice of innovative education within the national dialogue on higher learning. See the CIEL website at www.cielearn.org for more information.

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Creating Space for Change

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Higher education is in the midst of a profound renegotiation of the meaning of a college education. There is hardly a dimension of higher education that is not under scrutiny as institutions are asked to make undergraduate education cheaper, faster, less political, and more accessible, more relevant, more practical, more accountable, and more responsive. This renegotiation is taking place largely without real faculty participation. Some might say, without much active institutional participation. The pressures for change feel to many faculty unfocused, ill-informed, heavy-handed, and sometimes downright venomous, and they may well have produced the all-too-human response of hunkering down and hanging on for dear life to what we know best.

Like any academic, I want to intellectualize the problem in order to understand it. In fact, this essay has had many false starts as I've done just that. There's a deep intellectual satisfaction in naming and analyzing the causes and effects of a troubling problem. The difficulty is that the analysis takes on a life of its own and distracts me from the more pressing question – how can we imagine a different kind of institutional life, one that doesn't revolve around the same old tensions? These include, of course, the many tensions between teaching and research, faculty and administration, theoretical and applied knowledge, the academy and society,

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[1] The Consortium for Innovative Environments in Learning is an alliance of progressive institutions whose missions are grounded in innovative academic practices and the structural and organizational distinctiveness necessary to enact them. These are institutions that have re-thought everything from course work and student evaluation to the organization of the faculty and the relationship of the institution to the community. The histories and ongoing work of these institutions is the inspiration for this writing. For more information on the consortium, visit its website, www.cielearn.org.

disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning, teaching as a conserving activity and teaching as social action, and on an on.

Satisfying as that analysis is, it doesn't really ask anything new of me. It explains much, in a comfortable and familiar discourse; but the very process of this particular kind of thinking tends to forestall a different kind of analysis and a different kind of discourse. How do I engage the problem of the troubling state of undergraduate education in a way that is oriented toward change? My notion of change is not about simply succumbing. It is instead about creating a more reflective and engaged institutional culture that can entertain afresh the host of questions about what it means to be educated, what it means to be a faculty member, and what role institutions of higher learning are to play in our society. How, at a time when higher education is being reinvented from the outside in, can members of the higher education community go about re-imagining and redirecting their work from the inside out? To do that, we need to develop alternative views and practices of institutional life. If we can imagine a different way of being in the academy, we might begin to find common ground – with each other and with non-academics inside and beyond the academic world.

Peter Senge observed in an essay called "The Academy as Learning Community" that "it is always tempting to tell others how they need to change. It is another, and far rarer strategy, to confront the changed needed in our own behavior. Ironically the greatest power in supporting fundamental change is the power to be the change you are seeking to create" (Senge, 2000). The challenge, he proposes, is in examining and changing our own behavior. Anyone who has ever tried to lose weight or exercise more or change eating habits or stop smoking knows how hard this is – even though there is every good reason in the world to make these changes.

The crux of the problem is in Senge's Zen-like admonition to "be the change you are seeking to create." The implication is that it's one thing to envision alternatives, particularly alternatives for other people, but something altogether different to behave in ways consistent with the alternative you imagine. The literature on organizational change, though traditionally focused on business, offers academics some fresh perspectives. One such piece is a classic essay by Chris Argyris, "Teaching Smart People How to Learn" (Argyris, 2000).

Argyris studied top tier management consultants for 15 years – individuals who are highly educated, highly autonomous, highly committed to their work, highly successful in what they do, and in the business of helping to foster change in the individuals and organizations that employ them. Like faculty in so many ways, they are smart people. These individuals, Argyris discovered, are excellent at setting an agenda, at learning to frame and solve problems, and at helping others do the same things. But they are extremely resistant to reflecting on their own performance in times of change.

Resistance occurs in part because smart people have histories of success at what they do and have seldom had to confront their own shortcomings. When they are confronted with failure, smart people become defensive and embarrassed; they typically feel guilty and frustrated. Angry. To avoid vulnerability or embarrassment, they project blame outward. This response is familiar to any of us in academia: blame on the institution, the administration, students, colleagues, trustees, legislatures, donors, etc; lack of support, lack of cooperation, hidden agendas, other peoples' stupidity, outside meddling, impossible deadlines. Argyris observes that smart people rationalize their behavior by articulating standards or assumptions (espoused theories) that, on examination, are typically quite inconsistent with their actual behavior, their theories-in-action. Moreover, since smart people are typically adept at articulating their

arguments, they are pretty good at building a convincing case, another move that externalizes and deflects shortcomings from themselves. Defensiveness becomes a default mechanism that often sets in when smart people are challenged. The consequence, as Argyris points out, is that "defensive reasoning can block learning even when the individual commitment to it is high."

Argyris points out, what faculty probably know already about their own students but may not see as readily in themselves. To be able to change, you have to get at the constraints on old thinking, what Argyris calls "the cognitive rules or reasoning [people] use to design and implement their actions." This metacognitive process, though potentially difficult and even painful, is the mechanism that allows people to recognize the gaps between what they believe and what they do. Argyris concludes that "people can be taught to recognize the reasoning they use when they design and implement their actions. They can begin to identify the inconsistencies between their espoused and actual theories of action. They can face up to the fact that they unconsciously design and implement actions that they do not intend. Finally, people can learn how to identify what individuals and groups do to create organizational defenses and how these defenses contribute to an organization's problems."

If it is hard for individual faculty members to change, it is harder still for colleges, schools, and academic departments. Particularly when individual and institutional predispositions parallel and reinforce each other. And particularly when the impetus for change feels imposed from above or from outside, and individuals or institutions develop a compliance mentality, making grudging concessions without ownership or commitment. You can see the standoffs in so many of the key issues affecting higher education: accountability, curriculum change, governance. Even when they probably ought to be re-examined, core beliefs and

practices remain unchanged in favor or making adjustments on the margins, in territory that nobody really owns.

Robert Keagan and Lisa Lahey's *How The Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* takes up where Senge and Argyris leave off, in an effort to address the problem of changing complex, deeply engrained behaviors. "For every commitment we genuinely hold to bring about some important change, there is another commitment we hold that has the effect of preventing change" (Keagan and Lahey, 2001). What they call "Big Assumptions" are especially powerful because they defy naming; in fact, to name them is to weaken their power. They hold us as much as we hold them. Psychologically, the risk of examining a Big Assumption is tied up with risking a loss of control, stability, safety, status, or competence; the fear of moving "from a place where we are its captive to a place where we can look at it, reexamine it, and possibly alter it." Organizationally, the risk is owning up to the role that each of us plays in maintaining "the dynamic immune system by which *we* continuously manufacture *nonchange*" (Keagan and Lahey, 2001).

One of the most powerful Big Assumptions in higher education is what I'll call incrementalism – the tenet that new programs or initiatives require new faculty or administrators, new academic or administrative units, new physical spaces, new budgets and support staff because they must be added on to what is already in place. The corollary to incrementalism is overload -- that when initiatives are adopted but new resources are absent or insufficient, faculty and staff add to their existing workload, resulting in a chronic sense of being over-extended. Incrementalism is rationalized in all kinds of ways, and, like all Big Assumptions, drives institutional norms about what can and what can't be talked about or thought about. The combination of individual, interpersonal, and institutional constraints makes a Big Assumption all the more powerful as a deterrent to change.

While Kegan and Lahey's work on individual change is insightful, the extension to organizational change is more provocative. They provide us with a way to imagine academic institutions' breaking out of old patterns of discourse and replacing them with new and more constructive ways of talking that uses the language of commitment, of personal responsibility, of ongoing regard, of public agreement. The change of discourse can help us reach agreements about how we want to talk with each other, and ultimately what we can collectively imagine and commit to. Equally important, this can help us normalize the inevitable transgressions, recognizing that people aren't going to uphold their commitments all the time and that we can create more civil and shared ways to restore the discourse we desire.

Imagine beginning an academic year with an institutional project to make a department or a college or a university a more powerful learning environment – not beginning with students but with the people who work there. The tasks might include the following:

- Discovering the competing commitments that undermine the behaviors people say they want: What in individual and collective behavior keeps in place the things we say we don't like?
- Figuring out collectively how to improve the day-to-day interpersonal and intellectual workings of the institution: What would you like to be different about the culture of the institution? How would people need to behave on a day-to-day basis to create this culture?
- Figuring out how to enact and sustain the quality of the desired discourse particularly in the midst of conflict: How can people keep entrenched positions from re-forming and going under ground? How do we bring into

the open the hidden agendas of turf protection, inertia, risk aversion and suspicion?

- Developing a shared view of how the desired behaviors would affect not just individuals but the mission, philosophy, and practices of the institution: How do we assume a genuine, forward-looking perspective that is both responsive and responsible?

My purpose here is not to reduce the complexity of Keagan's and Lahey's approach to organizational change to something on the order of a weekend encounter group. A project on the order of what I have sketched here is a serious, sustained, highly self-conscious, and, frankly, courageous process. It flies in the face of the highly individualized work of academe: the work behind closed classroom, office, and laboratory doors, when we up are late at night doing the reading, writing, and thinking that is central to our most creative work, and when we read students' work and evaluate their performance. For that matter, an institutional-level project like this also pushes against the grain of the academic departments and disciplines as the chief organizational unit of higher education, and the present function of academic administrators who serve as buffers – or even shock-absorbers – between the academy and the community. A project like this must be institutionally based, and has to be continually renewed as new members join the faculty and as commitments wane in the face of competing pressures. What I'm suggesting here is a way to operationalize so much of the talk about inclusive, democratic, process-oriented philosophies of organizational life.

Equally important, this is not about sneaking a particular agenda through the back door by tricking colleagues into putting their guard down. Nor is it a way for the "enlightened people" to sway the intransigent. In fact, it's conceivable that a campus might go through such a project and wind up affirming where it began.

The outcome, though, would be the creation of a culture characterized by "positive restlessness" in the words of the DEEP Project, a culture that leaves the door open to change. The sources I have cited here remind us that for all the externalizing of institutional strains and conflicts, the resources for change rest within. Real institutional change – change that derives from commitment and not just compliance – comes from creating an institutional discourse characterized by shared power, transparency, a spirit of generativity, and mutual respect. Higher education exists today in a tough climate of enormous expectations and diminished resources. If the academy is to renew itself in the face of increasing social unease over what we do, the place to start is with ourselves.[2]

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[2] This essay owes much to the many generous readings and sustained encouragement of my CIEL colleague, Rita Pougiales of The Evergreen State College.