

Editorial Commentary

Introduction in Special Issue on Travelling of Management Ideas

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INTRODUCTION

In this special issue, we present five business anthropological papers, which focus on the global expansion of management concepts and ideas. Analytically speaking, we see, dominantly Western, management ideas “travelling” around the world (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005). These ideas on entrepreneurial behaviour, (local) ownership, decentralization, performance measurements, curriculum change and business process models, just to mention a few examples, are translated and implemented at a local level. The observation that ideas travel addresses the phenomenon that organizations tend to introduce the same transformations and changes at the same time. The travelling of ideas involves:

- Fashion ideas. One can think about this in terms of types, see: Meijer, et al., 2009; Boersma et al., 2009, transcending time and space
- Ideas that are locally translated into action
- Ideas that become enacted and institutionalized

Two perspectives on this process are possible (Örtenblad, 2010). There are scholars who treat management ideas as if they are unambiguous and as a result organizations, adopting certain management principles, become more similar. In terms of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) such organizations are isomorphs. An alternative way of reasoning is the idea that the management ideas are ambiguous and multi-interpretable. As an end-result, management ideas can result in a variety of applications on a local level.

The process of management ideas transcending time and space which are translated, transformed and localized can best be understood from a business anthropological perspective.

Anthropological fieldwork methods are increasingly becoming popular in management and organization studies (Van Marrewijk et al. 2010). Field research is a research strategy to describe, to interpret and to explain behavior, meaning and cultural products of persons involved in a general limited field by direct data collection of researchers who are physically present. The major invention of the anthropologist is the “doing” of ethnographic fieldwork by means of participant observation (Bate, 1997). The aim is to give an emphatic understanding of the daily activities of the employees, to give the impression of having “been there” and, to describe the connections of these employees with social, historical, cultural, political and economic processes from outside the organization. Organizations are perceived as a cultural phenomenon.

FIELD OF HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

An interesting field to explore the travelling of management ideas is Higher Education. The landscape of Higher Education is changing dramatically not in the last place because of globalisation, marketization and massification (Vaira, 2004). All over the world, local actors in Higher Education institutes are looking for and using ideas and concepts that can help them with their choices. This process is anything but a neutral phenomenon and includes power issues and (possible) tensions between the global and the local: the university has become an organizational actor on a global scale.

Traditionally, universities were distinguished from other organizations because they were embedded in national systems of knowledge production and because of their lack of coherent organizational structures (Drori, Meyer and Hwang, 2006: 21). Academic units could be viewed as a *loosely coupled* system: a situation in which partners in the relationship are responsive but retain evidence of organizational separateness and identity (Weick, 1976: 3). The advantage of the university as a loosely coupled system was that any one of the partners can adjust to and modify local unique contingencies without affecting the whole system (Weick, 1976: 6-7). A loosely coupled system can be perceived as a creative organizational invention in a higher education institutes (Orton & Weick, 1990). These characteristics, however, have come under pressure because of globalization forces. Universities started to accept and adopt organizational models originating from other domains, such as business models.

The university became an organizational actor more than a place for knowledge production, teaching and community service (Birnbaum, 1988). Academic activities are no longer seen as natural sources of knowledge, progress and wisdom, rather rational planning and innovation policies are seen as necessary means to link academic activities to its socio-economic environments. In this respect, the emerging globalized model of universities is part of a wider development. Krücken and Meier (2006) argue that there are four distinctive elements that characterize the globalized university model: 1) organizational accountability based upon the implementation of formal procedures and protocols, 2) the tendency to develop own mission statements, goals and objectives often presented in policy reports meant to enforce an organizational identity, 3) the implementation of technical systems and units to support the organization, and 4) the transformation of the university management into a profession. “The diffusion of a globalized model of university is not only driven by construction and observation processes *within* the sector of higher education. Nowadays, firms, hospitals, public administration agencies, and universities are conceptualized first and foremost as *organizations*, having typical *organizational* problems and being in need for efficient *organizational* solutions.” (Krücken and Meier, 2006: 242)

An important driver of the globalized model of universities is the spread of modern, Western management ideas in Higher Education systems (Stensaker, 2007). Individual agents, social networks and supranational organizations are key in this process since they can translate the ideas from a global to a local scale. This is not a one-dimensional process; the carriers and “translators” of the ideas re-interpreted the meaning as they move into new settings (Morris and Lancaster 2005; Mueller and Whittle, 2011).

THE TRAVELING IDEA OF MODE 2

Management concepts and ideas come into fashion and travel around the globe. An illustration of a recent concept that became well known all over the world and which was (also) used at a local South African university (see: Boersma et al., 2008). The travelling idea in this example is the concept of *Mode 2*, which came into fashion within the area of Higher Education in the late 1980s. Mode 2 is a concept or idea that addresses the growing relevance of university-industry relationships and new ways of producing knowledge. In his lecture on *Higher Education Relevance in the 21st Century*, delivered at the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in Paris, 1998, Michael Gibbons, then Secretary General of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, directly opened his presentation by directly addressing the transformation that occurred in higher education over the past two decades (Gibbons 1998, cit. 1).

“During the past twenty years, a new paradigm of the function of higher education in society has gradually emerged. Gone, it seems, is the high-mindedness of a von Humboldt or a Newman with its pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. In their places has been put a view of higher education in which universities are meant to serve society, primarily by supporting the economy and promoting the quality of life of its citizens. ... The new paradigm is bringing in its train a new culture of accountability as is evident by the spread of managerialism and an ethos of value for money throughout higher education systems internationally.”

In his speech, he also referred to Mode 2, which is opposite to the concept of Mode 1. The latter, in Gibbons’ line of thinking, represents the ideals of the traditional Humboldtian university in which research is done independently from personal interests and takes place according to theoretically driven, mono-disciplinary lines. Mode 2, at the other hand, presents the idea of a new production of knowledge, based upon more neo-liberal ways of thinking. Mode 2 presupposes knowledge production within networks in which heterogeneous partners participate, such as industry, academic units, consultancy organizations and interests groups. The idea is that “research agendas in the context of application” will result in research outcomes that are of direct relevance for citizens. Not surprisingly, Blume and Geesink (2000) and Pestre (2003) have criticized the idea Mode 2, for example for making academic research (too) dependent on industrial financial sources.

Despite the criticism - which, make sense to us - we see that this Mode 2 idea came into fashion partly because transnational organizations could function as vehicles to transcend time and space (e.g. the idea has been picked up in various countries all over the world) and partly because of the influence of key-actors in the field of higher education policy such as policy-makers at UNESCO. In this process Mode 2 has been adopted in about the same period of time

in many places all over the world. It became into fashion in the 1990s and in different ways, it became part of many local political agendas.

However, the idea of Mode 2 is nothing but a word if it is not recognized and picked up by local actors as an interesting concept. In addition, if we want to analyse this part of the travelling of ideas, then we realize that concepts such as Mode 2 can be used for various reasons. In other words, people make sense of and give meaning to such concepts as Mode 2. Moreover, given the different local habitués of people, their local power-games, cultural rules and political contexts, people interpreted and read a concept as Mode 2 in different ways (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996). This means that, if we want to understand the meaning of concepts such as Mode 2 (and for that matter ideas on entrepreneurial behaviour, (local) ownership, decentralization, performance measurements, curriculum change and business process models, which we mentioned before) we have to study local practices.

In our example, people at a local South African university (more precisely the North West University, see Boersma et al., 2008) who made sense of the concept (Weick, 1995) translated the idea of Mode 2. At the level of rhetoric, there seemed to be some convergence of ideas and policy at the North West University based upon Gibbons' idea of Mode 2. For example, the rector as a sensitizing concept to initiate organizational change and to influence the cognitive schemes of the researchers has used the idea. It has been used by researchers to legitimize their cooperation with the international banking sector, it has used by the industrial partners to find a common playing field with the university researchers and instructors. Students, finally, used the Mode 2 rhetoric to argue why they chose to follow applied research courses in the first place.

At the same time, it was a challenge for the various people involved to use Mode 2 for finding a common ground for knowledge creation and exchange – in this way the Mode 2 production of knowledge functioned an organizational principle rather than a adequate description (let alone theory) about a changing local South African university. The idea of Mode 2 became enacted not because of one person, but because “...other people are persuaded to join in, decisions are [were] formally made...” (Czarniawska and Joerges 1996, cit. p. 44). What followed was a structuration of the organizational field (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) meaning that at the North West University the idea of Mode 2 was used to create dominant patterns of organizing. Mode 2 (and the developments at the North West University for that matter) has led to a convergence of practices. At the same time, however, the institutional responses have differed because of local conditions – a process described by Green as *glocalisation* (Green, 1999 in Tabulawa, 2007).

OUTLINE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The authors of the various chapters present management ideas that travel around the world in the area of Higher Education. Especially the focus is on the relation between “the North”, which is often dominating the institutional debate in Higher Educational circles and “the South”. The authors in this book show that the spread of global models of modern actorhood generate a great deal of loose coupling, ritual adaptation, and symbolic politics at the level of individual institutions. The content of this special issue is a spin-off from the activities undertaken by the members of the Center for International Cooperation (CIS) of the VU University Amsterdam and research done at the Department of Organizational Sciences of the Faculty of Social Science of the same institute. The contributions are:

- Philip Rayner and Kate Ashcroft: *The purposes and practices of quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education: “journey”, adaptation and integration*. Kate Ashcroft and Philip Rayner analyze quality assurance and its purposes and practices in higher education as a travelling idea; its development from industry models to its application in northern higher education systems; its “journey” to Ethiopia and its adaptation and integration into a developing higher education system. They discuss the challenges faced by the emerging Ethiopian model and the relevance of different purposes and methodologies to the development context. Finally they outline the consensus that has emerged from this process about values and processes for quality assurance.
- Peter van der Sijde Marissa Popma and Kora Tushune: *The community-engaged university: the case of universities in Ethiopia*. In this contribution to the special issue, Van der Sijde, Popma and Tushune introduce the concept of community engagement as part of an entrepreneurial university. Such institutes develop an intellectual foundation for engagement and integrating the key aspects of the university’s mission: teaching, research and community service. Community engagement is explored by the authors via a questionnaire sent to respondents at the nine longer-established universities in Ethiopia and a case study of Jimma University that practices community engagement. The authors develop and strengthen an understanding of how Ethiopian universities work with their local communities. The Jimma case illustrates the processes and outcomes of embedding community engagement in Ethiopian higher education.
- Juliette Koning and Egide Maassen: *Autonomous Institutions? Local Ownership in Higher Education in Eastern Indonesia*. In their contribution, Koning and Maassen discuss how staff members of eight public universities and polytechnics in Eastern Indonesia experience developments towards greater autonomy in Indonesian higher education. This new paradigm in higher education, aimed at greater efficiency and quality controls, is positioned within the context of the globalization of higher education and the more recent political decentralization in Indonesia. Koning and Maassen analyze the outcomes of research that enquired about the need and background of greater autonomy and the main challenges and threats as perceived by those working in higher education, such as rectors, deans, lecturers and support staff. The results presented by Koning and Maassen point in particular towards difficulties with breaking away from decades of centralized control and subsequent issues of institutional “culture” and local ownership. This helps explain why autonomy is simultaneously being perceived as empowering (finally being able to set own institutional objectives) as well as threatening (job loss, new job requirements, leadership).
- Anna Bon, Tom De Schryver, Hossana Twinomurinzi, Dolf Jordaan: *Less (in context) is more (creativity): m-learning as a traveling idea at the University of Pretoria*. In their contribution the authors of this article study different versions of m-learning practices at the University of Pretoria. The first version of m-learning at this university differed so strongly from traditional m-learning known in the Northern hemisphere that its introduction involved more adaptation than adoption of a new idea. Moreover the adaptations of the original idea did not happen in a trial and error way. On the contrary the adaptations occurred before the implementation phase of the new idea. These two features made the researchers conclude that it is more appropriate to label the initial adoption of m-learning at the University of Pretoria a traveling idea than a reinvention.
- Frans Kamsteeg and Harry Wels: *Traveling ideas: about equality and power play around “diversity” at North West University (NWU), South Africa*. In their contribution, Kamsteeg

and Wels argue that South African Higher Education institutions are presently going through a transitional phase of transformation in which institutional cultures and identities are strongly contested. The ambiguity that comes along with such a process is illustrated through two rivaling “narratives of change” at North West University, presented in a number of reports and institutional publications that deal with the present state of this merged institution. The article reveals that the concept of diversity plays a pivotal, though very different, role in both narratives.

These contributions are good example of collaboration between practitioners in the field of higher education change, such as members of the Centre for International Cooperation (CIS), and academics studying processes of organizational change in higher education. Although the cooperation has not always been easy, among others due to distinct managerial incentives of practitioners and academics, this special issue is a step further in, what we think, is the right direction.

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