

## **TELEOLOGICAL PRESSURES AND ATELEOLOGICAL POSSIBILITIES ON AND FOR A FRAGILE LEARNING COMMUNITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR FRAMING LIFELONG LEARNING FUTURES FOR AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY ACADEMICS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper applies the teleological–ateleological lens to the activities of a group of postgraduate and early career researchers at an Australian university. Given the tensions between organisational imperatives and individual aspirations, there are mixed signals about whether the group can be accurately and appropriately considered a learning community.

### **KEYWORDS**

academic work – ateleological – learning communities – teleological – universities

### **INTRODUCTION**

The teleological–ateleological distinction (Introna, 1996), which is conceptualised below, constitutes a useful conceptual lens for analysing and evaluating potential learning communities within large organisations and from a lifelong learning perspective. While it is important to eschew an institutional–individual binary in favour of more fluid and situated understandings of whether and how small groups engage in lifelong learning in such organisations, there is nevertheless value in analysing the juxtaposition of system-wide imperatives and personal aspirations in relation to workplace learning.

This paper applies a teleological–ateleological lens to the activities of a group of postgraduate and early career researchers at an Australian university. For the past three years, members of the group have sought both individually and as a group to enhance one another's and their own skills and outcomes in academic research and publishing. The organisational imperatives have included the former Australian Government's Research Quality Framework and consequent university and faculty research management plans and workload allocation models, while the group's initiatives have included fortnightly meetings, annual research symposia, writing workshops, edited publications and the beginnings of strategic alliances with other groups within and outside the organisation.

The paper identifies some areas of possible convergence between the organisational imperatives and the individual aspirations that might usefully be pursued more systematically. At the same time, there are significant dissonances between these imperatives and aspirations that are inefficient and unproductive at best and debilitating and self-defeating at

worst. This analysis suggests shared and specific responsibilities for all stakeholders in the academics' lifelong and workplace learning if the potential of that learning is to be harnessed and enhanced.

More broadly, the author concludes that there are mixed signals in relation to whether the postgraduate and early career researcher group can be accurately and appropriately considered a learning community from a lifelong learning perspective. On the one hand, the ateleological half of the conceptual lens highlights encouraging possibilities in the group's energy, resilience and ongoing commitment to lifelong learning. On the other hand, the teleological half of the lens emphasises some countervailing pressures that might weaken these possibilities. These teleological pressures and ateleological possibilities suggest in turn significant implications for understanding and hopefully nurturing fragile learning communities, thereby framing their lifelong learning futures.

The paper is divided into five sections:

- A conceptual framework focused on the teleological–ateleological distinction and learning communities;
- A brief description of the group;
- An account of the group's teleological pressures;
- A consideration of the group's ateleological possibilities;
- A conclusion that links those pressures and possibilities with the group's status as a potential learning community and the broader framing of lifelong learning futures for Australian university academics.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The teleological–ateleological distinction is not seen as a fixed binary but instead as two clusters of characteristics of decision-making. Introna (1996) elaborated the distinction in his

framework of nine attributes of an information systems design process, as illustrated in Table 1 below. (Inevitably presenting the clusters in oppositional tabular form can be seen as

teleological and normative, whereas the relationship between them is more iterative and nuanced than can be depicted here.)

Attributes of the design process	Teleological development	Ateleological development
Ultimate purpose	Goal/purpose	Wholeness/harmony
Intermediate goals	Effectiveness/efficiency	Equilibrium/homeostasis
Design focus	Ends/result	Means/process
Designers	Explicit designer	Member/part
Design scope	Part	Whole
Design process	Creative problem solving	Local adaptation, reflection and learning
Design problems	Complexity and conflict	Time
Design management	Centralized	Decentralized
Design control	Direct intervention in line with a master plan	Indirect via rules and regulators

Table 1 Teleological and ateleological development systems (Introna, 1996, p. 26, as cited in Jones, Luck, McConachie & Danaher, 2006, p. 58)

Instead of specific attributes being taken up in this paper, the focus is on a distillation of the different assumptions about and approaches to decision-making represented by the two clusters of characteristics. The important caveat noted above about not presenting these clusters as a mutually opposed binary notwithstanding, it is possible to identify the following sets of ideas:

- **Teleological decision-making** favours centralised, top-down action emphasising organisational hierarchy and official positions and valuing the writing of and adherence to rational strategic plans with individualised accountability and performance indicators;
- **Ateleological decision-making** favours decentralised, bottom-up action emphasising separate and shared interests and diverse talents and valuing the emergent and holistic expansion of mutual benefit and social capital.

The notion of learning communities advocated here aligns closely with this distillation of ateleological decision-making. While certainly not the only available definition, the following characterisation of the term encapsulates that alignment:

*Learning communities are made up of people who share a common purpose. They collaborate to draw on individual strengths, respect a variety of perspectives, and actively promote learning opportunities. The outcomes are the creation of a vibrant, synergistic environment, enhanced potential for all members, and the possibility that*

*new knowledge will be created. (Kilpatrick, Barrett & Jones, 2003, p. 11)*

What is common to these distillations of ateleological decision-making and learning communities is a set of principles and values that are crucial in framing future lifelong learning for Australian university academics:

- Respect for individual agency;
- Concern for and empathy with others;
- Conceptualisation of capital and power as positive, diffuse and diverse;
- Recognition of multiple interests and viewpoints;
- Commitment to outcomes that align rather than oppose individual and institutional aspirations.

### The postgraduate and early career researcher group

The group discussed in this paper consists of postgraduate students, early career researchers (both those currently completing their doctorates and those within the first five years of having done so) and more experienced academics in an Australian university. The group emerged in one faculty but members have joined from at least one other faculty. While the group existed prior to the author's involvement in it, the discussion here focuses on the period of that involvement, from mid-2005 to the present.

Group membership, as assessed by meeting attendance, varies from four or five to around 25 to 30. Most members are qualitative researchers, although a few engage in quantitative research, and they pursue a wide range of paradigms (from

interpretivism to critical theory to poststructuralism) and methods (from action research and case study to discourse analysis and narrative inquiry to autoethnography and phenomenography). While all members conduct educational research, that phenomenon is understood broadly, with fields of focus ranging from early years and school education to postcompulsory and university education and from learners and/or educators to formal and/or informal domains of learning and teaching.

Members attend meetings at two of the university's three Australian campuses, linked via videoconference or teleconference facilities as available. Most members are full-time academic staff members, some of whom are studying part-time; the group also includes some full-time doctoral candidates and more recently a few masters students. The group has an electronic space for lodging such items as meeting notices and potentially useful readings, but this is not easily accessed by off-campus members and is not used by all group members.

Since mid-2005, the group's focus has broadened considerably. While the practice of fortnightly meetings has been maintained, their content has extended from an initial interest in different research methods to discussing individual members' current writing activities and published articles and planning an annual research symposium (the first in 2006 consisting of 12 presentations and one forum and the second in 2007 consisting of 20 presentations, two group discussions among the presenters and one focused conversation involving experienced researchers from across the university). Three writing workshops were conducted in 2007, each related to a collective writing project (two special theme issues of a refereed journal and one edited book).

Members have been consciously concerned about the need to strive for balance in two specific aspects of the group's operations. The first has been between meetings being informal and friendly opportunities for sharing ideas and encouraging one another and being vehicles for achieving specific and well-defined outcomes. The second has been between drawing on the experience of mentors (the first having officially recognised responsibility in that role, others sharing more informally) and highlighting the interests and voices of members.

### **The group's teleological pressures**

The teleological pressures on the group derive principally from the intersection of late capitalism, economic rationalism and corporate

managerialism (Danaher, Gale & Erben, 2000) as they have been applied to Australian universities for at least the past two decades. One illustrative manifestation of this intersection has been the phenomenon whereby governments provide less public funding of universities while insisting on increased levels of accountability and compliance. Another manifestation has been the emergence of what Marginson (2002) called the 'enterprise university', whose characteristics most relevant to this discussion are as follows:

- Strong executive control with presidential-style leadership, bearing significant institutional autonomy and capable of strategic initiative, and mediating much or most the relationships between on one hand the external world (government, professions, civil society), on the other hand the internal world of the academic units;
- University missions, governance and internal administration (including quality assurance and performance regimes) that are increasingly business-like in character, though the University does not become simply another business;
- The increasing marginalisation of traditional academic governance – academic boards, faculty assemblies and the like – and its partial replacement by executive groups, and new semi-formal and informal IT-based mechanisms for communication and top-down consultation;...
- The growing salience of institutional identity *vis a vis* disciplinary identity; and the weakening of academic identity in University organization, with more flexible and generic structures increasingly used in teaching and research, alongside more traditional academic units - and at the extreme, certain erstwhile academic decisions now made by non-academic units e.g. in international recruitment, IT or marketing;... (2002, n.p.)

The point to emphasise in this discussion is that both steering at a distance and the highlighted features of the enterprise university are much more likely to recognise and reward teleological than ateleological decision-making; they are also less likely to facilitate the emergence of learning communities with the principles and values articulated above. A corollary of this situation is that the options for framing lifelong learning futures for university academics are liable to be

more restrictive and less enabling than might otherwise be the case.

It is against this national backdrop, strongly influenced by equivalent forces in other western countries (Enders & Jongbloed, 2007), that the teleological pressures exercised on that group by the institution where the postgraduate and early career researcher group is located are to be understood. In an environment where universities compete for scarce resources and must demonstrate to government their compliance with a range of policies and indicators, individual academics are increasingly required to demonstrate equivalent compliance and to justify their salaries and their working time. This demonstration ranges from writing research plans with targets of varying duration to recording reflections on students' learning in individual courses each semester to completing an annual performance monitoring form – all clearly instruments of teleological decision-making. While the importance of achieving and reporting outcomes would be accepted by most academics, the sheer weight of the administrative burden associated with these processes is increasingly seen as irksome and both an unwelcome distraction from and an inefficient alternative to the space and time needed to achieve real and sustainable outcomes in teaching and research.

In the case of the group under discussion here, these teleological pressures have resulted in some understandable confusion and uncertainty about how best to engage with the multiple and often competing requirements of contemporary academic work. Examples of what has prompted this confusion and uncertainty, themselves manifestations of a fractured and perhaps dysfunctional higher education system, include the following:

- A debate about the meanings of the term “early career researcher”. While there was a suggestion to align the group’s definition of this term with the Australian Research Council’s definition of someone within the first five years of attaining a doctorate, the group retained a wider and more inclusive definition that applied to nearly all group members and that avoided what was seen as unnecessarily dividing the group into different categories of researchers.
- A discussion of the purpose and value of centrally mandated research plans. On the one hand, there was a view that such plans are helpful to individuals in clarifying goals and in explicating for achieving those goals. On the other

hand, there was a feeling that not linking individual goals and strategies with the allocation of resources to enable them to occur was a recipe for failure, and furthermore that the individuals concerned would be blamed for such failure without having the capacity to avoid it. From this perspective, the research plans were viewed variously as opportunities for strategic thinking and/or as vehicles of institutional surveillance and control.

- A perception by some individuals outside the group that it was exclusive and/or potentially a threat to positional authority and/or the attainment of institutionally imposed performance indicators. This perception was particularly perplexing to group members, who saw themselves as inclusive and as individually and collectively working hard to attain research outcomes that would benefit equally individual members, the group and the institution. This perplexity generated considerable discussion about the relative merits of adopting a higher or a lower profile in the institution, a conversation that is continuing.

The acceptance that not everything that can be understood as teleological is necessarily an onerous pressure notwithstanding, the examples presented here have in common the operation of forces outside the group that are seen as at best neutral and at worst hostile in relation to the group’s interests and aspirations. The corollary of centralised, top-down decision-making within an organisational hierarchy is a generally implicit devaluing of the voices and value of those positioned lower in that hierarchy – including postgraduate students and early career researchers. The effects of this corollary are potentially counterproductive and corrosive; certainly they do little to contribute to the generation of learning communities and to help to frame productive and sustainable lifelong learning futures for individual academics and the universities to which they belong.

### **The group’s ateleological possibilities**

Despite these teleological pressures, the group has explored – enthusiastically and with increasing success – the possibilities attendant on ateleological decision-making. The insistence on emergent and holistic group identity has been seen in such strategies as sharing the responsibilities of chairperson and sometimes of caterer among group members and ensuring that most meetings contain opportunities for informal

communication of current activities and future priorities. At the same time, the collaborative writing projects have provided a space for individual members to achieve institutionally valued research outcomes within inclusive, supportive and generative frameworks. Each project has had a specific focus (the intersection between the value of a project and its ethical foundations; designing doctoral research; and conducting research in areas that unsettle the researcher and in ways that hopefully disrupt taken for granted assumptions) and associated organising questions designed to maximise overall coherence while encouraging diversity of topic and approach.

The collaborative projects have been significantly advanced by conducting writing workshops. Modelled on the REACT process of facilitating the publication of research about university learning and teaching developed at Central Queensland University (<http://sleid.cqu.edu.au/REACT/>), the workshops have enacted a set of processes centred on providing targeted feedback, beginning with a summary of what readers believed were the main points of the text, proceeding to identifying the text's perceived strengths and then to suggestions and questions that the author might wish to consider and closing with the author's opportunity to seek clarification of particular aspects of the feedback. More importantly, the processes have been consciously based on specific principles, including the explicit valuing of multiple viewpoints and the demonstration of respect for all participants.

Another demonstration of the group's exploration of ateleological possibilities has been the annual research symposia, moving from two half days in 2006 to two full days in 2007. Again the selection of a theme was effective in giving some coherence to each symposium while giving free rein to the exploration of that theme from a wide range of perspectives. The second symposium entailed presentations by individuals from two other faculties and one other campus of the university, generating considerable interest in research in other disciplines and paradigms. The work involved in organising the symposia was shared widely among the group; both events generated a high level of engagement and enthusiasm.

Yet another example of the possibilities of ateleological decision-making has been discussions with two other groups in the university. These have begun as informal conversations at the campus coffee shop, which have been followed by meetings between the

groups. A prominent feature of conversations and meetings alike has been the establishment of rapport and trust, based on a respect for the groups' separate and shared interests and concerns. One outcome of that rapport and trust was that several members of one of the other groups presented at the aforementioned research symposium in 2007. It is hoped that these initially tentative efforts at *rapprochement* will be able to be consolidated and extended in 2008 and beyond.

At one level, the strategies outlined here might be considered unremarkable and even pedestrian. At another level, given the competition for resources and the associated work intensification for academics across the Australian higher education sector outlined above, and in view of the teleological pressures on academics' work noted in the previous section, these strategies can be seen – and are certainly regarded by group members – as potential lifelines in an increasingly turbulent and stressful environment. Certainly they are posited on the recognition of diverse talents and directed at enhancing mutual benefit and the expansion of social capital – all key elements of both effective learning communities and sustainable lifelong learning futures for Australian university academics.

#### **CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND FRAMING LIFELONG LEARNING FUTURES FOR AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY ACADEMICS**

In relation to the definition of learning communities presented above, it is clear that if the postgraduate and early career researcher group is a learning community it is an extremely fragile one. On the one hand, group members “share a common purpose” and “collaborate to draw on individual strengths, respective a variety of perspectives, and actively promote learning opportunities” (Kilpatrick, Barrett & Jones, 2003, p. 11). On the other hand, the longer-term outcomes associated with “the creation of a vibrant, synergistic environment, enhanced potential for all members, and the possibility that new knowledge will be created” (p. 11) have been established less definitively. Not that aspects of such creation, potential and possibility are not evident in the group's operations to date; it is more a matter of the long-term sustainability of those outcomes. It is conceivable that even more onerous teleological decision-making and/or a change in the group's membership might result in the group's activities being scaled down or ending altogether.

With regard to framing lifelong learning futures for these and other Australian university academics, the principles and values distilled above from ateleological decision-making and conceptions of learning communities provide both a way forward and a benchmark for prospective academic work. From one perspective, phenomena such as individual agency, empathy with others and diffuse and diverse notions of capital and power are likely to remain unrealised aspirations in an environment dominated by discourses of compliance and conformity. From a very different perspective, lifelong learning futures – understood here in terms of individual fulfilment and collective empowerment – can indeed change and transform theoretical imaginings and material realities if they are based on these and other philosophical and spiritual foundations. Such are the ateleological possibilities animating and encouraging the fragile learning communities and framing the lifelong learning futures of academics working in contemporary Australian universities.

[http://www.utwente.nl/cheps/summer\\_school/2002/abstracts/Marginson.doc/](http://www.utwente.nl/cheps/summer_school/2002/abstracts/Marginson.doc/)

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