Can Organisational Vision Be Aligned to Management Processes for Engaging with E-learning? A Case Study for a Recasting Dialogue as Central to Infrastructure Development

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ABSTRACT This article provides an account of how one manager considered the alignment of an organisational vision with an implementation strategy for creating an effective organisational infrastructure. The discussion reported in the article provides a manager’s view, a case, of how one institution introduced online learning initiatives. Critical to this case is the development of suitable and sustainable organisational processes that were in alignment with the organisational vision. This discussion could aid managers of virtual learning environments in higher education institutions by (a) modelling an approach to linking institutional vision and Laurillard’s Conversational Framework as an implementation strategy for e-learning and, (b) improving managers’ understanding of the processes of and necessity of strategic alignment.

At the heart of a university is the iterative dialogue between teacher and learner ... as we imagine the future forms of universities, that dialogue should remain the salient feature ... in this way, universities preserve the ability to be reflective and adaptive to their students’ learning needs: it is not a business model that defines their aims, but the vision of a learning society. (Laurillard, 2002, p. 241)

Introduction

This article is structured in the following manner. First, a brief background of the context is described. Second the institutional vision and management processes are discussed. Third, the challenges of e-learning and trends within flexible learning and the use of technology-based solutions are briefly introduced. Finally, Laurillard’s (2002) Conversational Framework is outlined and examples are provided of how this was adapted and applied within the setting.

Contextual Background

Over the past 40 years Singapore has become a regional leader through its investment-led economic strategy where previously there was a reliance on the manufacturing and services industries. Recently a new strategic agenda has emerged with an increased focus on the health, education and creative industries. These strategies aim to increase Singapore’s involvement and participation in the burgeoning globalisation of knowledge.

Few would disagree that the globalisation of knowledge is driving change and transforming world economies at an extraordinary rate. All industries and sectors are affected and educational organisations are being challenged to think globally. Notably, information technology and
communications industries have impacted on the distribution and access to information, and economies like Singapore are increasingly active in this arena.

The realigning of the economy towards creating Singapore as the regional 'hub' for health, education and the creative industries is also further evidence of the move towards globalisation. It is likely that the focus will create many new economic benefits. In addition, it seems that cooperation, alliances, information exchange and mutual dependency are critical to the new marketplace (Sutherland, 2002; Ministry for Communication and the Arts [MICA], 2003). For example, integral to Singapore's aim, not unlike other strong economies, is to encourage local and international institutions to collaborate by providing considerable financial support and incentives to establish, for example, new campuses and partnerships. A good example of this is the development by an Australian university (University of New South Wales) of a new campus located near Changi Airport.

The focus on building a regional 'hub' provides a vision for organisations to enter and participate in the global knowledge economy. The new focus is indeed pertinent to this case as there are significant opportunities to benefit from such incentives as this institution's strategic aim, educational and business foci fall into two of these areas.

The Institution

Located in Singapore, this particular creative arts institution (hereafter referred to as the Institution) strategically aims to become the preferred regional provider of arts education. Government funded, but privately owned, the not-for-profit Institution competes for students with a range of other universities, polytechnics and private providers of arts education across Singapore and the wider South-East Asian region.

The Vision

The vision of the Institution is closely aligned with the new national economic strategic agenda of Singapore. Swift change over the past 24 months at the Institution has seen the appointment of a new chief executive officer, a restructuring of the operational structure and recruitment of a considerable number of new management-level personnel in response to becoming more outwardly focused and competitive. An ambitious new organisational vision underpinned by values such as quality, internationalisation and cultural leadership has also emerged, and reflects external global and national directions. This vision is now embedded throughout the Institution and is stated as:

- enabling Art, Design and Performance through education, research, publication, performance and exhibition of the highest quality from Diploma to PhD operating nationally and internationally whilst contributing to the Cultural Wealth of Singapore as the leading regional provider of Creativity. (Student Handbook, 2005, p.3)

The Institution's strategy for achieving its vision is multifarious and requires all stakeholders to be drawn towards new perceptions and understandings of the vision in action (Collins & Porras, 1996; Morden, 1997; Senge et al, 1994; Tichy & Sherman, 1994). In looking at the internal environment there is some evidence to suggest that the Institution is embarking on a combined planning and entrepreneurial approach to management processes (Mintzberg et al, 1998).

Management Processes within the Institution

Consistent with a planning approach, as detailed by Mintzberg et al, the organisational culture is strategically controlled, and formal planning includes the detailing of outcomes, objectives, and so forth so that processes can be made explicit. Capital budgeting is embedded within the planning process and section managers often provide bottom-up strategic planning and plans are assessed on
a cost–benefit basis. The chief executive officer is responsible for all management processes and maintains ultimate strategic decision-making and control. Typically, divisions, faculties and other operational centres then accept responsibility for putting plans into action and for being accountable to their performance.

While the Institution currently measures performance through strategic control as detailed by Goold & Quinn (1990), it is recognised that a broad understanding of strategic control is had. For example, the difference between planned and actual outcomes enables questioning of the strategy itself. While planned strategies can and should be measured, there is scope to include the emergent ideas. By measuring the overall performance of the Institution and not just the performance of its planning there is scope for valuable strategic development.

The Institution recognises that strategic planning has a number of fallacies. Mintzberg et al (1998) state that planning in this way assumes that an organisation is ‘able to predict the course of its environment, to control it, or simply to assume its stability’ Otherwise, it makes no sense to set the inflexible course of action that constitutes a strategic plan. Managers are also aware that if they abstract themselves from the daily detail and rely on hard data such as formalised institutional memoranda such as reports, accounting statements and business plans, that this may impede their inability to form good strategies. There is recognition of the danger in relying on neat and tidy numerical quantitative assessments on performance that are isolated to discrete business units and initiatives, as they could discourage strategic thinking and disempower managers to see the broader picture (Mintzberg, 1994).

Mintzberg et al state that ‘effective strategy making connects acting to thinking which in turn connects implementation to formulation. We try things, and the ones that work gradually converge into patterns that become strategies’ (pp. 71-72). They suggest that systems can become control tools rather than facilitating tools for thinking and learning organisation. For the Institution to be truly creative, it requires managers to be ready to explore and create new perspectives and undertake a broader understanding of the value of both planned and unexpected initiatives that could and may result in better outcomes.

**Challenges for E-Learning**

In the area of e-learning, this is certainly true. The current strategic model could present some pragmatic difficulties for meeting educational and business imperatives of the institution. This is also a reality for many in the higher education sector and not unique or unexpected to the Institution. While the surplus attached to increased student numbers may be attractive, the intangible value benefits of organisational efficiencies, enhancing reputation and what is considered to be knowledge capital and how this, when defined, might contribute to the knowledge economy of arts education, are also worthy considerations. Here the dilemma arises as there are few examples of how these costs and benefits are attributed. What does exist highlights the high level of uncertainty attributed to e-learning (Oslington, 2004). Indeed, the challenge to find sustainable e-solutions is full of risk when you move away from the balance sheet. Oslington states that many costs are:

- compounded by the irreversibility of investment in online teaching. As irreversibility comes from most of the costs of online teaching projects being sunk costs. For instance, computer hardware has a very low resale value and software has none. Expenditures on setting up systems for delivering online courses and expenditures on marketing courses are specific to the institution and hence have no outside market value if a project is abandoned. (pp. 233-234)

Costing e-development is essential but extremely difficult. The lessons to be learned from others, such as the recently failed E University in the United Kingdom, suggests that technologies have not been the ‘God’ of surplus in the higher education marketplace. Careful and considered assessment of how e-learning might impact on other aspects of institutional infrastructures and external perceptions also need to be considered.

An assessment of the associated complementary stakeholders’ benefits against the risk has led to more realistic judgements about the potential or otherwise of e-learning at this institution. The
case described here, as all are, is unique to this context, and as Oslington (2004) highlights, no single model for costing, assessing the risks or benefits can be applied to all situations. However, all higher education contexts have to be careful of high levels of unsubstantiated investment and a balanced consideration of all aspects of the motives for ‘getting into’ e-learning. Laurillard’s (2002) Conversational Framework may well go some way to enable such decision making; that is, for developing rationales that are considerate of both pedagogy and strategic imperatives when it comes to cost and benefit analysis. Laurillard’s Conversational Framework will be discussed more fully later in this article. What now follows is an introduction to developments in the area of e-learning that go in some part to provide background to this case.

Flexible Learning and Technology

There has been unprecedented growth in the area of e-learning (Bates, 1995; Taylor, 1995; Ikenberry, 1999; Dede, 1999; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Evans et al, 2004). Over the past 10 years or so web-based information technologies have expanded education options for learners the world over. This has created a considerable substantive field for investigation where there is a paucity of information beyond case studies and personal descriptions for its use to facilitate learning (Gilbert, 2000). However, Kirkup & Kirkwood (2005) point out in their analysis of the higher education sector published learning and teaching strategies of 2000, that while 81% declared information and communication technologies as the singularly most cited change mechanism, their impact on learning and teaching was limited. They stated that

> In campus-based contexts, teaching staff appropriate those technologies which they can incorporate into their teaching activity mostly easily, that offer affordances for what they already do, rather than those which radically change teaching and learning practices. (p. 188)

It comes as no surprise, then, that pedagogy and the dominance of technology-led development remain in many instances at a mismatch as the economic imperatives of being part of a global economy influence the sector. Indeed, it should be noted that the field of e-learning generally has seen an expansion and proliferation of research-focused investigations in order to understand and inform web-based learning development (Beetham, 2005). This creates a problem for this institution, as everyone seems to be ‘getting into’ e-based solutions but the costs are enormous and the benefits not always clearly identifiable. The imperative to ensure cost effectiveness and come to grips with the potential of the technology to transform educational transactions is at odds with the market-driven visions (Evans et al, n.d.). Laurillard (2002) states that the higher education sector is being forced to change, and the pressures wrought upon it have nothing to do with traditions and values. Instead the pressure is for reduced costs, for greater scale and scope, and for innovation through technology ... we scurry about in response to the increasing external pressures which exercise their own peculiar forms of change. Academics are going on courses on management training and marketing methods. Reform of an education system might progress faster if they went on courses on how to teach better. (p.3)

In building its strategic position in Singapore’s further and higher education sector, the Institution is pursuing and enhancing a range of new learning options. The role of e-learning in expanding the Institution’s learning strategies in a time when there is increased pressure on academic staff to teach more students. E-learning can strategically support the Institution’s vision.

Contextualising Future Aspirations

The e-learning initiative is purposefully underpinned by the values that are stated by the Dearing Report (1997). In compliance with an external stakeholder, this is essential for quality assurance. The Institution accreditation body is a United Kingdom provider and compliance with UK policy and awareness of initiatives and trends is essential for maintaining this. The values as stated as:

- to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities;
- to increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake;
to serve the needs of a knowledge-based economy;

• to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society (Dearing, 1997, p. 72).

The challenge for the Institution will be in reconciling the high level of uncertainty with regard to costs and benefits and desirable educational values. The Institution will need to carefully identify and assess opportunities to meet the organisation’s vision and corresponding aims and at the same time bend to economic pressures and technological advances. To this end the Institution is becoming more adaptive by becoming a learning organisation.

Learning Organisations and Laurillard’s Conversational Framework

The concept of a learning organisation has been widely debated in the strategy literature since the work of Lindale (1959 PLEASE ADD TO REFS) and others such as Quinn (1980) and Nelson & Winter (1982). Laurillard (1999 PLEASE ADD TO REFS) states that learning organisations need to be adaptive in the increasingly messy and altering landscape of higher education. Key to Laurillard’s thesis is the notion that an organisation can learn from experience and adapt to its environment. This is critical for how the Institution e-learning policy, implementation strategy and consequent change management processes are defined. Key to this concept is the notion that we adapt to our environment through understanding and acting within the context. Laurillard’s work has a focus on mirroring organisational infrastructure similarly to how individuals learn. This is attractive for higher education contexts where learning is central to the purpose and presage of the institution. This is also consistent with Nonaka’s (1994) work, which Laurillard draws upon in marrying organisational theory and her own framework. She states that ‘organisational knowledge creation is seen as a continual dynamic process of conversion between the different levels of the individual, the group and the organisation’ (p. 215). In a learning organisation routines are challenged by new emergent situations (conflict), which cause the effect of change and strategic learning.

If, according to Laurillard (2002), a ‘learning organisation, therefore, is one that attempts to conduct an internal learning conversation that allows it to learn from experience and to adapt to its environment’ (p. 215), then Institution conversations are going to be critical for ensuring an effective implementation of e-learning. For the Institution, the conversations will be linked to all levels of the institution, from student to chief executive officer, to inform the development of e-learning systems. De Freitas & Oliver (2005) also argue that the conversations that people have ‘by negotiating practices and their meaning, forms of work are legitimised or de-legitimated and lessons are learnt’ (p. 86). Strategic learning in this way offers the Institution an opportunity to inform actions in an ongoing, responsive and cyclic manner (Schon, 1983). The Conversational Framework will provide the Institution with a systematic and purposeful tool to enable this.

The Conversational Framework

Laurillard (2002) suggests that one test of the Conversational Framework with regard to its usefulness in designing an effective organisational infrastructure is to ‘interpret each part, and use that interpretation to challenge constructively the way we run our universities’ (p. 215). Figure 1 provides detail of how the internal dialogue might look. It demonstrates the internal conversations whereby events in one area feed into another, which in turn emerge at an institutional level to inform the reconceptualisation of learning and teaching policy and so forth. For the Institution, using this approach as an organising principle for developing an effective organisational structure for e-learning has several benefits. First, the process is cyclic so there is continual improvement and the scope to respond quickly to emergent ideas is available; second, systems can be put in place to ensure adequate monitoring of the action cycle embedded in the Conversational Framework; and third, the process is iterative and knowledge building at all levels. This is consistent with the Institution vision, associated values and intentions. As an organising principle for management processes Laurillard (2002) reiterates the opportunity for duality in focusing on both lower-level operational aspects and reflecting on the strategic learning from the operation aspects at a higher level. Critical to this process is the sameness of the Conversational Framework throughout the various levels of the organisational structure. In this framework there is potential for staff to inform
each other and ‘for managers to value and incorporate the expertise of their academic leaders within their management practices’ (Yielder YELDER IN REFS & Codling, p. 320). In this way, when all participate in cyclic action research for enhancement, the e-learning development will be owned, sustainable and aligned with the strategic vision of the institution.

Impact of the Conversational Framework on the Institution

The impact of the Conversational Framework on management processes falls into a number of categories. This is consistent with Nonaka’s ideas regarding organisational knowledge as represented by Laurillard (2002) to consist of several iterative processes that create dialogue between theory and practice at all layers of the organisation. For the Institution this could be viewed as a succession of activities: Expanding knowledge, Sharing, Innovating, Evaluating, Implementing, Validating (Laurillard, 2003, p. 220 2003 NOT IN REFS). In Table I, these are defined and applied in relation to the Institution context. They provide examples of the iterative processes required to operate within a Conversational Framework.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme activities</th>
<th>Institution Specific Activities</th>
<th>Institution General activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expanding knowledge</td>
<td>Create an Institution database of learning materials, learning objects and associated content</td>
<td>Develop an institutional knowledge management policy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Enable staff to add to existing ideas and construct new ones</td>
<td>Provide access to national and international databases of arts resources</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ensure access to funding for attending conferences and other related events</td>
<td>Promote discipline-specific responsibility for developments and ideas in e-learning and ICT developments</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Expect and demonstrate excellence in teaching in all appointments</td>
<td>Analyse market needs in relation to discipline areas to ensure cost-effective development and the potential for sharing of knowledge, as ICT content development is costly</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ensure ICT developments are led by discipline demands and students’ academic interests and demands, e.g. to be more flexible with regard to access</td>
<td>The library to provide access to suitable journals and resources for discipline developments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The library to provide access to suitable journals and resources for discipline developments</td>
<td>Respond to themes across the examiners’ reports and student evaluations to provide new solutions to students’ learning needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharing knowledge</td>
<td>Create opportunities for the sharing of tacit knowledge of staff</td>
<td>Develop a plan for determining deployment of staff and other resources such as teaching spaces</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Develop discipline-based staff development plans in response to ICT developments to ensure adequate skill for implementation</td>
<td>Optimise cross-disciplinary foundation courses for more efficient block-teaching. Seek agreement</td>
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</table>

Figure 1. The Institution Conversational Framework for the learning organisation.

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across faculties and academic administration at the Institution for areas such as research methodology, English language support, etc.
Encourage the selection and assessment of software by staff whereby standards mean development is interoperable
Establish an Institution staff development programme for implementing ICT that is relevant to the various disciplines
Develop Institution policy that ensures prerequisite qualifications and/or experience in ICT to ensure quality in design, implementation and teaching with ICT
Establish Institution forums to share ideas amongst staff and new development in the research literature
Establish multi-skilled community of practice development teams to learning and teaching using ICT

S E N S E?

Innovating
Agree limits of resources and funding at the Institution for innovation using ICT
Establish learning and teaching committees to develop strategic business, analysis, costs and development plans at faculty and managerial levels
Develop staff deployment policy using ICT alongside current Institution workload policies.
Development time is critical to innovation
Ensure quality monitoring processes are in place
Develop policy on reversioning, copyright and standards for development
Ensure validity and justification of ICT innovation for promoting effective/better learning outcomes
Act on and respond to evaluations of innovation

Evaluating
Establish refereeing process for evaluating ICT developments
Ensure pilot/beta testing of all ICT innovations during development and prior to launch
Use evaluation reports to inform ICT developments

Implementing
Exploit innovation for competitive advantage
Ensure associated infrastructure and management teams have established policy and management processes
Provide opportunities to communicate needs and issues
Market reputation and innovation to ensure competitive advantage
Establish support teams for management of ICT learning and content systems
Assess and calculate costs of innovation alongside traditional courses and programmes to inform future management resourcing
Link appraisal and promotion to teaching excellence using ICT
Provide suitable guidance for ongoing learning and teaching of staff and students using ICT
Define quality of service to students and staff to ensure quality assurance with introducing ICT innovations

Validating
Reflect on all reports and evaluations of the ICT innovation
Review and act on reports and evaluations of ICT innovation
Monitor implementation with regard to efficiency of the Institution management processes and procedures
Disseminate reports

Table I. Activities for an effective organisational structure at the Institution.

Complexity and Future

The complexity of any organisation cannot be grounded in one brief discussion; while this case has pointed out that a planning approach to strategy may well be in place, it is the vision and values enacted by the entrepreneurial leadership that perhaps contrast, complement and contextualise this approach to e-learning developments. This is important for understanding how e-learning will be located in this context and how and why the Conversational Framework was applied. There is no doubt that information technology has changed the way in which information and knowledge is accessed (Yielder & Codling, 2004).

This climate calls for both entrepreneurial leadership and concrete planning strategies. Conceptually this may seem impossible, as both are at the ends of a spectrum but nonetheless
critical in the repositioning of the Institution on a number of levels. For example, key decisions are
centralised so there is scope for flexibility and responsiveness even with the best-made plans. While
the overall strategy is held in the vision of the leadership, the process of the strategy is known
through experience and intuition of all staff at the Institution. So, the best conceived plans can be
dismissed and new responsive ones developed. Careful personal control by managers is maintained
to ensure that swift changes can be made; in this way the vision is both deliberate and also
emergent. This is consistent with Mintzberg et al, who state that

the organisation is likewise malleable, a simple structure responsive to the leaders' directives, whether an actual start-up, a company owned by an individual, or a turnaround in a
large established organisation many of whose procedures and power relationships are suspended
to allow the visionary leader considerable latitude for manoeuvre. (p. 143)

This is very much evident in the Institution’s market positioning and the development of the e-
learning initiative.

The danger, which Stacey (1992) points out, is that this places an enormous responsibility on
the visionary who perhaps relies on a few lieutenants while the organisation beneath enacts as
required. This seems to be consistent with a managerial form of governance that has become the
norm in many higher education institutions, where:

leadership tends to exist as a consequence of hierarchy, and is ascribed to the individual (or a
small group) at the apex of the hierarchy. This individual (or group) is assumed to set the tone of
the organisation and to establish its official objectives. (Yelder & Codling, 2004, p. 319)

This could create a culture of dependency and conformity as members may not be open to new
ideas or able to express them, and learning opportunities which are the catalysts for innovative
action are lost. Further, staff are increasingly required to conform to externally driven expectations
from stakeholders who compound the situation. The stakeholders here include validating and
accreditation organisations, the Institution Board, government education authorities and industry
regulators, for example.

This will create an enormous challenge for managing the change required in meeting internal
and external stakeholder expectations. In relation to e-learning development generally, De Freitas & Oliver (2005) add: 'organisations would benefit from top-down and bottom-up policy, strategy
and activities, interacting and informing one another' (p. 86). In order to manage internal
stakeholder perspectives there will be scope for the Conversational Framework (Laurillard, 2003
2003 NOT IN REFs) to ensure academic leadership is not 'subsumed by corporate management
practices on the basis of an unchallenged assumption that leadership automatically goes with
position in a management hierarchy' (Yelder & Codling, p. 319). This will be
important and an additional challenge for the Institution as it develops appropriate management
processes and an organisational infrastructure that is considerate and cognisant of both academic
and management expectations and realities.

**Conclusion**

This discussion has provided a case that has outlined the adaptation of Laurillard’s (2002)
Conversational Framework for the alignment of one institutions vision to the implementation of e-
learning. It has provided description of the context and the opportunities and challenges that exist
for the development of e-learning. Stakeholder perspectives have been considered in selecting and
applying the framework, with a range of strategies identified for implementation. The Institution
has begun the process. For managers implementing e-learning, this case may demonstrate the
effective linking of theory to practice and the development of appropriate management processes
for allaying fears about the uncertainty of web-based solutions in the current higher education
environment.

**References**

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