Dialectical reasoning around quality culture

Dries Berings and Styn Grieten

Human Relations Research Group. Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussel (HUB), Belgium.
E-mail address: dries.berings@hubrussel.be.

Dr. Dries Berings is Associate Professor in Organizational Behaviour at the Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussels and member of the Relational Research Group (HRRG). His research is focussed on the psychological and cultural aspects of the development of quality assurance and management in colleges and universities.

Dr. Styn Grieten is Associate Professor in Organizational Behaviour at the Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussels and member of the Relational Research Group (HRRG). His research is focussed on organizational change and organizational learning from a relational and positive perspective inspired by the appreciative inquiry.

In this paper we elaborate the idea of 'dialectical reasoning' as a way of reconciling managerial paradoxes. Two 'mental exercises' have been developed to encourage such dialectical reasoning in the field of quality culture.
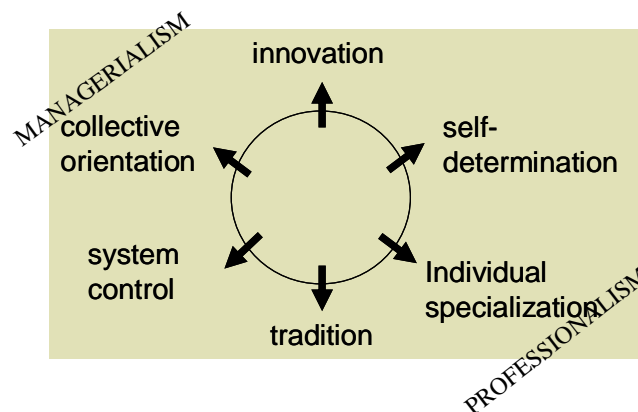
The first exercise is an adoption of the core quadrant method developed by Daniel Ofman. After transferring this method from the individual to the organisational level we can use it to make people more sensitive to the dialectical nature of a quality culture and to learn to find creative solutions for organisational paradoxes like empowerment versus management control.

The essence of the second exercise is dialectical reasoning by means of considering opposing cultural values (e.g. teamwork vs. individual specialisation) in a reciprocal way. This way of mental mapping is inspired by the work of Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars on the dilemma reconciliation process in intercultural management.

1. Introduction

In this paper we elaborate on the idea of dialectical reasoning as a way of reconciling the tension between professionalism and managerialism and, more specifically, that which exists around the management paradoxes as defined by Berings, namely the tension between innovation and tradition, between system control and self-determination and between collective orientation and individual specialisation (Berings, 2009; Berings et al. 2011). The basic assumption is that the quality element of organisation and innovation lies in the capacity to think dialectically. Dialectical thinking is a way to handle seeming contractions and inconsistencies, rooted in the dialectical tradition in Western as well as Eastern philosophy (Peng & Nisbett, 1999) Thinking dialectically around quality culture consists of becoming more aware of fundamental paradoxes underlying organizational culture (Berings, 2009; Berings et al., 2011; Ehlers, 2009). Such paradoxes can best be understood as competing values (Quinn, 1988) and ought to be considered apparently contradictory in so far as paradoxes include a challenge to find creative solutions that transcend the apparent contradiction. In this paper we discuss two mental exercises developed in order to stimulate and learn dialectical thinking about quality culture. The two mental exercises can give support to administrators, management teams and quality assurance boards of Higher Educational Institutions (HEIS) to develop their own skills in dialectical reasoning about organisational culture and in a broader sense their quality assurance policy. Looking into quality culture from a dialectical perspective is an idea that has been already embraced by other scholars (Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Johnson, 1992; Kolsaker, 2008). The exercises can be embedded in a workshop of half a day and monitored by a trainer familiar with the conceptual framework for quality culture (Berings et al., 2012) as well as with the quality assurance practices of the HEI involved.

Figure 1:   Competing values underpinning quality culture (Berings et al., 2011)

The first exercise is an adaptation of the core quadrant method developed by Daniel Ofman (2001). Daniel Ofman's method of core quadrants has been developed for individual self-reflection and personal growth. We transferred the method from the individual level to the organisation level. The purpose is to make people more sensitive to the dialectical nature of a quality culture and how thinking dialectical can help to find creative solutions for organisational paradoxes like empowerment versus management control of individualism versus collectivism.

The core of the second exercise is considering opposing cultural values (e.g. teamwork vs. individual specialisation) as the context of each other in a reciprocal way. This manner of mental mapping is inspired by the work on the dilemma reconciliation process in

intercultural management (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998).

Before we present in more detail these two mental exercises we discuss the tension between professionalism and managerialism and, more specifically, the underlying dimensions of quality culture as defined by Berings (Berings et al., 2010), system control vs. self-determination, collective orientation vs. individual specialisaton, innovation vs. tradition.

2.   Managerialism versus professionalism

Management and higher education is not an untroubled marriage. In particular, the task of management to control processes and people seems to be in conflict with the principles of academic freedom and specialisation. Academics have a tendency to resent all forms of management control like top down systems of quality assurance (EUA, 2006). Stated simply: academics, professors and researchers alike don't like to be managed, because they are convinced that they have the competences to manage themselves. They believe that freedom and empowerment give the best guarantee of high level performance (Bridgman, 2007). Such resistance against management is often conceptualised as a reaction towards managerialism (e.g. Kolsaker, 2008; Saunders, 2006; O'Connor & White, 2012; Yokoyama, 2006). Managerialism is a term used to indicate the belief that all organisations, including colleges and universities, can do best by the application of generic management principles and tools. In the context of higher education the term managerialism is often used pejoratively, for instance by Locke (2009): "Managerialism: What occurs when a special group, called management, ensconces itself systemically in organizations and deprives owners and employees of decision-making power …" Furthermore, in the context of quality assurance scepticism toward the application of quality assurance systems exists: "It is often the case that when speaking of quality, it is easy to revert back to such managerial concepts as quality control, quality mechanisms, quality management, etc. These concepts, however, are not neutral. They convey a technocratic and top-down approach that will backfire in academic settings. The self-perception of academics as successful professionals who are committed to excellence means that they dislike being managed." (EUA, 2006, p. 6). In consequence introducing principles and tools of total quality management in higher education is always a tricky endeavour that spontaneously evokes a debate concerning the distribution of power and control in the organization or, more generally, a debate about management control in education. However, looking at classical definitions of management teaches that management is more than control. The four basic functions of management are: planning, organising, leading and control (Daft, Kendrick & Vershina, 2010). Moreover, in contemporary approaches to management two elements are added: vision and learning (Vijoen and van Waveren, 2009). When we look at the daily reality in colleges and universities we cannot deny that all six function of management are needed and also present in daily practice. In other words the question is not whether higher education needs management but rather how we can cope with fundamental management paradoxes and how we can develop management competencies which sustain such dialectical reasoning.

In order to underpin dialectical reasoning concerning quality culture, a conceptual framework has been developed by Berings (Berings, 2011). The core of the model consists of three competing values (Figure 1). The questionnaire 'Cultural Mirrors' (Berings, 2011) that has been developed in line with this model can be used to obtain a culture profile for the organisation (college, faculty or department). The survey results can help individuals and teams involved in quality assurance to formulate points for attention, change and improvement.

In this paper we discuss how the conceptual framework and the six circumscriptions of ideal typical images of organisation, which form the core of the instrument 'Cultural

Mirrors', can also be used in a training context for managers and professionals in HEIS involved in quality assurance in order to learn to reason dialectically.

3.   Mental exercises in dialectical reasoning

Exercise 1: Core quadrants

The first exercise is called 'core quadrants' and is an application of the core quadrant method developed by Ofman (Ofman, 2001; 2006). The purpose of the core quadrant method is stimulating individuals to reflect on their own qualities and aversions ('allergies') in order to become more sensitive to possible pitfalls in their own personality, competencies and behaviour, a process which can result in the formulation of challenges for individual development aiming at a 'balanced' personality . After transferring this self reflection method from the individual to the organisational level, it can be used to reflect on quality culture in order to make people more sensitive to the dialectical nature of a quality culture. Such reflection can support dialectical reasoning and can help to find creative solutions for organisational paradoxes. More concretely, the participants are invited to look for allergies, core qualities, pitfalls and challenges in relation to each of the six images of organisation that form the building blocks of the dialectical framework for quality culture (Berings et al., 2012).

Table 1:   Six images of organisation

Image of organisation	*Core value*	*Features*
Innovation oriented	Innovation	Proactive external adaptation and internal focus on continuous improvement
Tradition oriented	Tradition	Conservative reflex and devotion to traditional values and practices
People oriented	self-determination	Confidence in people and room for self-determination and creativity
System oriented	system control	Coordination, standardization and formalization by plans, schedules and hierarchical structures
Professionnally oriented	individual specialisation	The competences of highly qualified and specialized autonomous professionals are the standardizing principles; management and administration are supposed to be supportive rather than directing.
Collective oriented	collective orientation	Shared ideas and values, social problem solving and team work are taken for granted.

The four structural elements in the method of Ofman are: core qualities, pitfalls, challenges and allergies. Before we apply them to the images of organisation we look at the original definition of these four structural elements presented as a cycle by Daniel Ofman.

Figure 2: Core Quadrant Method (adopted from Ofman, 2011)
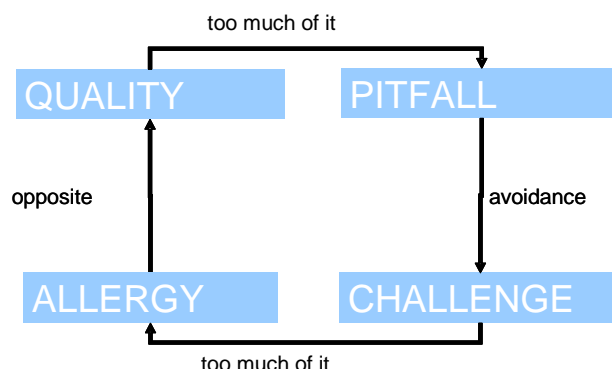
"*Core qualities* are attributes that form part of a person's essence (core); people are steeped in these qualities, which place all their - more or less striking - competences in a certain light. A person is 'colored' by his or her core qualities. It is their strong point, the characteristic that immediately comes to mind when we think of this person. Examples of core qualities are determination, consideration (for others), precision, courage, receptivity, orderliness, empathy, flexibility, etc." (Ofman, 2001). Core qualities can be seen as the core of the self concept as well as the core of the social identity or image of a person. What we do in our exercises is to replace 'person' by 'organisation' in the definition above. The core quality of an organisation is then 'the characteristic that immediately comes to mind when we think of *such an organisation*'.

The participants are asked to formulated individually, or in couples, three possible core qualities or advantages that a department like X has as compared to a department that is not organised in such a way. This assignment can be facilitated by asking the participant to complete this sentence: "A system-oriented organisation like X can be proud of itself because … ".

The second element is called *pitfall*. A quality can become a non-quality or distortion. Distortion is an overdeveloped core quality. For example, the core quality 'order' can become 'rigidity' if overdeveloped and turned into a weakness instead of a strength, simply stated, 'too much of a good thing'. Core values and pitfalls are not opposites but rather two sides of the same coin. In other words the relationship between both can best be understood in a dialectical way. Ofman (2001) formulates it as follows: "the pitfall just goes with the core quality; they are inextricably linked. Core quality and pitfall go together like light and darkness".

In our exercise we ask the participants in the session to think about possible pitfalls or disadvantages for each of the six images of the organisation, for example the system oriented organisation X. The participants are asked to formulated individually or in couples , three possible pitfalls or disadvantages that a department that radically follows model X can have as compared to a department that is only moderately organised in such a way. This part of the exercise can be facilitated by asking the participant to complete this sentence: "A system-oriented organisation like X can become dysfunctional when … ".

Too much of a core quality of an organization can turn into a weakness. To prevent this pitfall it is advisable to formulate a *challenge*, the third quadrant in the cycle. If there is a risk that order leads to rigidity, the challenge could be to build flexibility into your systems

and procedures. The participants are requested to formulate individually or in couples a challenge for each of the six images of organisation. The purpose is to adopt the image, for example the system-oriented organisation X, so that the pitfall can be prevented. A possible question could be how flexibility can be included or integrated into a highly formalised quality system with lots of rules and directives, for example a quality system developed in line with the directives of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) (Drennan, 1999; Van den Berghe, 1997).). This part of the exercise can be facilitated by asking the participant to complete this sentence: "A system-oriented organisation like X can prevent itself becoming a dysfunctional organisation by … ".

The formulation of a challenge as a counterweight to the detected pitfall eventually can lead to a new pitfall, namely that the organisation comes in a situation that is the negation of the core quality. For example, bringing flexibility into the system could lead to a lack of coordination and control or even chaos, just what a system-oriented organisation X absolutely doesn't like or even has an aversion to. Such an aversion is called *allergy*. It is noteworthy to mention that what is an allergy for the advocates of a certain image of organisation, can be a core quality or ideal for the opponents of such an approach. For example, 'chaos' is a allergy for the advocates of a bureaucratic way of organising but can be reframed in a positive way as 'freedom' by their opponents. In order to define the allergy that corresponds with a certain way of organising, the participants are requested to think about what is the 'nightmare' of the advocates of such a way of organising. They are asked also to think about what is the 'dream' of the opponents that corresponds with these 'nightmares'. This part of the exercise can be facilitated by asingk the participant to complete this sentence: "People who like to work in a system-oriented organisation like X do this because they abominate …".

To control the work load we ask each participant to carry out this exercise for two of the six images of organisation. Besides the system-oriented organisation, there are five other images in the instrument 'Cultural Mirrors' (Berings, 2011):

In organization X the managers trust their employees highly. They believe that most people are intrinsically motivated and capable of figuring out how to work best. Consequently, anyone can carry out his duties according to his own insights, principles and style. – People oriented.

In organization X, there is a real team spirit. The staff has a strong sense that they are all contributing to a common goal and ideal. Time and effort are allocated to develop a common future vision. The staff uses this as a frame of reference for their own work. - Collective oriented.

Organization X employs in particular specialists who are recruited mainly because of their specific professional skills. These professionals focus primarily on their own specialization and pay less attention to the organization as a whole. The support services are at their disposal for practical and organizational issues. – Professionally oriented

Organization X is known as a trend setter in terms of the use of modern methods and techniques. It rapidly responds to new trends in society. Changes in the offer and internal organization and regulations take place in rapid succession. If improvement is considered to be possible, action is immediately taken. - Innovation oriented

Organization X is known for its sound and, also, traditional approach. This organization only brings about change when absolutely necessary and only if it is almost certain that the new approach is better than the old one. – Tradition oriented.

The participants are requested to fill in the result of this mental exercise on a blank sheet. Each participant or pair of participants is invited to present their results for one or two of the six images of organisation in a plenary session. The session ends with a group discussion in which the participants are encouraged to bring concrete examples of good practice from their own experience.

Exercise 2: Contextualisation

The second mental exercise is called 'contextualisation'. The focus is here on the three contrasting core values corresponding to the six images of organisation. These three competing values correspond to the three bipolarities in the conceptual framework for quality culture (Figure 1).

Here dialectical thinking is stimulated by considering opposing cultural values in a reciprocal way. The six cultural values correspond to the six images of organisation (Table 1). This way of thinking is inspired by the work of Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998) on the dilemma reconciliation process in intercultural management. Reconciliation means in this context making two apparently conflicting things compatible or consistent with each other.

For each of these three pairs of competing values we consider two situations. In the first situation core value A has the opposite value B as its context. In the second situation value A is the context for core value B. We give one example:
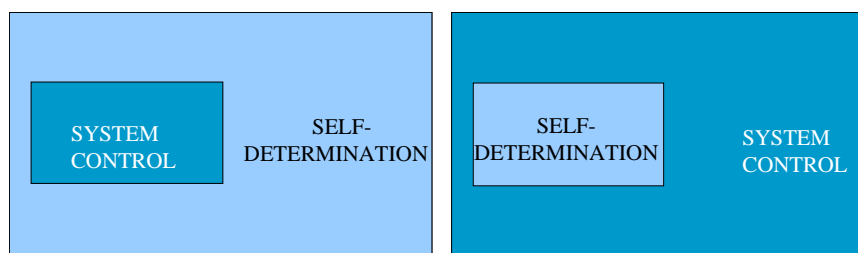

The core value of the system-oriented organisation is 'system control'. The core value of the opposite image, the people-oriented organisation, is 'self-determination'. In the first situation (left) the core value is system control. We are working in an organisation that places its focus on system control by formalising input, processes and output in a rather bureaucratic way, for example based an the ISO-directives for a formal quality system. This approach is challenged by the mentality of professors that is still deeply convinced of the idea of academic freedom. The question is: how can we integrate the idea of freedom into the system-oriented approach? One of the possible solutions is offered by the advocates of the ISO-approach, namely 'ownership'. The members of the faculty ought to be the owners of the procedures that are crucial for their work. Owner means that they are the architect or developers as well as the managers of these procedures. In the second situation (on the right side) the accent lies on self-determination. Imagine a department that still relies on the individual responsibility and freedom of each professor and researcher. In such a situation the department will be confronted with the external demand for accountability. The question is: how can we stimulate professors to account for the choices that they make daily, and how they can form an agreement about it with their colleagues?

The same mental exercise can be carried out for the other two pairs of competing values. Each time the participants are asked to imagine two situations. On the left side value A is the core value and B the contextual value. On the right side the opposite is true.
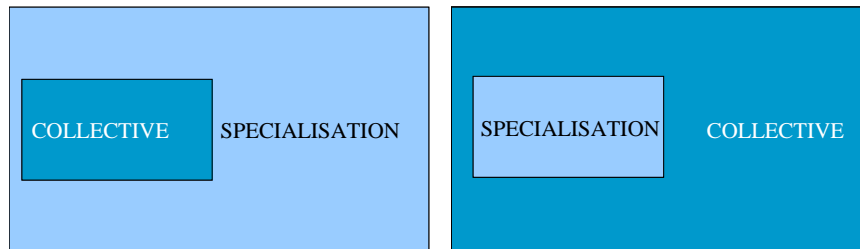
In the case of the scheme above, on the left side the question is that of how we could create room for individual ambition, competition, competence development and career perspectives without undermining the basic principle of team-based and collective orientation. On the right side the core value is specialisation. The question is here concerns how we can bring elements of team spirit and corporation into a situation that is characterised by individual competition and performance management, for example through the idea of tenure track and career-driven research.
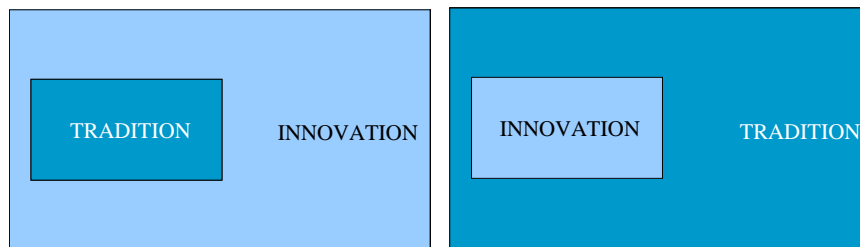
A comparable mental exercise can be made for the competing values of tradition and innovation, starting on the left side with the concept of a traditionally organised department and on the right side with a situation that is dominated by change en? and innovation.

4.   Discussion

The two exercises as we have described above can be applied to the organisational culture of a department or faculty. Another possibility is to apply it more specifically to the quality assurance policy. Equivalent to the six images of organisation we can consider six forms of quality assurance. Two forms of quality assurance approach are well known from the TQM literature. The first form is based on system control, the second one on improvement. Sitkin et al. (1994) distinguish a Quality Control Approach (TQC) from a Quality Learning Approach (TQL). In line with this Vijoen and van Waveren (2009) argue that implementing quality management in higher education demands a paradigm shift from traditional management (planning, organising, leading and controlling) to a focus on continuous improvement. But also for the other four images of organisation (people, collective, tradition or specialisation-oriented) variants of quality assurance can be imagined. A people-oriented approach and a collective-oriented approach to quality assurance invest in the empowerment of individuals and teams respectively. A specialisation-oriented approach will rely more on output-based quality control, for example the amount and quality of scientific output. Finally a tradition-oriented form of quality assurance will be focussed on preserving the good practices that already exist. With these six types of quality assurance in mind we can carry out the two exercises as proposed in this paper.

The method discussed in this paper is not a quick fix method for dealing with practical issues and resolving urgent problems. It is not a form of single loop learning but rather a form of double-loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Double-loop learning can be considered as thinking more deeply about assumptions and beliefs. Investing in such a mental exercise

asks for time and energy but above all it requires a kind of openness and readiness for dialogue and change. Saying this, we finish our paper with a paradox. Investing in dialectical thinking about organisational culture requires a certain culture, a culture of openness and dialogue. An intriguing and challenging question that still remains open is that of how we can introduce such a condition into a culture that is rather rigid and completely dominated by practical short-term thinking and single-loop learning.

References:

Argyris, C, & Schön, D.A. (1996). *Organizational learning II: Theory, method & practice.* Reading: Addison-Wesley.

Berings, D. (2009). *Reflection on quality culture as a substantial element of quality management in higher education.* Paper presented at the Fourth European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) of the European University Association (EUA), Copenhagen (19-21 November 2009).

Berings, D. (2011). *Cultuurspiegels: samen reflecteren over kwaliteitscultuur. Stap voor stap [Cultural Mirrors: reflection together on quality culture. Step by step.].* Brussel: Human Relations Research Group.

Berings, D., Beerten, Z., Hulpiau, V., & Verhesschen, P. (2011). Quality culture in higher education: from theory to practice. In A. Blättler et al. (Eds.) *Building bridges: Making sense of quality assurance in European, national and institutional contexts.* EUA Case Studies. (pp. 38-49).

Bridgman, T. (2007). Freedom and autonomy in the university enterprise. *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 20*, 478-490.

Cameron, K.S., & Quinn, R.E. (1999). *Diagnosing and changing organizational culture.* Reading: Addison-Wesley).

Drennan, L.T. (1999). Total Quality Management in the Scottish Universities. *International Journal: Continuous Improvement Monitor*, 1(4).

Ehlers, U.D. (2009). Understanding quality culture. *Quality Assurance in Education, 17*, 313-363.

EUA (2006). *Quality Culture in European universities: a Bottom-up approach. Brussels:* European University Association).

Hampden-Turner, C. & Trompenaars, F. (2000). *Building Cross-Cultural Competence.* Chichester: Wiley & Sons, Chichester.

Harvey, L., & Stensaker, B. (2008). *Quality* Culture: understandings, boundaries and linkages. *European Journal of Education, 43,* 4, 427-442.

Johnson, B. (1992). *Polarity Management.* Amherst:HRD Press.

Kolsaker, A. (2008). Academic professionalism in the managerialist era: a study of English universities. *Studies in Higher Education*, *3* (5), 513 – 25.

Locke, R.R. (2009). Managerialism and the demise of the Big Three. *Real-world economics review, 51*, 28-47.

O'Connor, P., & White, K. (2012). Similarities and differences in collegiality/managerialism in Irish and Australian universities. *Gender and education, 23*(7), 903-919.

Ofman, D. (2001). *Core qualities. A gateway to Human Resources.* Scriptum.

Quinn, R.E. (1988). *Beyond rational management. Mastering the paradoxes and competing demands of high performance.* London: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Peng, K., & Nisbett, R.A. (1999) Culture, Dialectics, and Reasoning About Contradiction. *American Psychologist, 54*(9), 741-54.

Saunders, M. (2006). The madness and malady of managerialism. *Quadrant Magazine, 50* (3), 9-17.

Sitkin, S.B., Sutcliffe, K.M., & Schroeder, R.G. (1994). Distinguishing control from learning in total quality management: A contingency perspective. *Academy of Management Review, 19*, 537-564.

Trompenaars, F. & Hampden-Turner, C. (1998). *Riding the Waves of Culture.* London: Brealey Publishing.

Van den Berghe, W. (1997). Application of ISO9000 standards to education and training. Thessaloniki: CEDEFOP.

Yokoyama, K. (2006). The effect of the research assessment exercise on organisational culture in English universities: collegiality versus managerialism. *Tertiary Education and Management*, *12*(4), 311-322.