



The Learning Organization

The governance of organizational learning: Empirical evidence from best-practice universities in Germany

Sabine Lauer, Uwe Wilkesmann,

Article information:

To cite this document:

Sabine Lauer, Uwe Wilkesmann, (2017) "The governance of organizational learning: Empirical evidence from best-practice universities in Germany", The Learning Organization, Vol. 24 Issue: 5, pp.266-277, <https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-02-2017-0012>

Permanent link to this document:

<https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-02-2017-0012>

Downloaded on: 31 October 2017, At: 02:27 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 20 other documents.

To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 77 times since 2017*

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

(2017), "How does leadership development help universities become learning organisations?", The Learning Organization, Vol. 24 Iss 5 pp. 278-285 <<https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-02-2017-0019>>

(2017), "Learning together and working apart: routines for organizational learning in virtual teams", The Learning Organization, Vol. 24 Iss 3 pp. 138-149 <<https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-12-2016-0101>>

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by

Token: JournalAuthor:B47B8143-257D-4B15-9406-B895C82338AF:

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

INVITED ARTICLE

The governance of organizational learning

Empirical evidence from best-practice universities in Germany

Sabine Lauer and Uwe Wilkesmann

*Center for Higher Education, TU Dortmund University,
Dortmund, Germany*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to link two modes of governance (transactional and transformational) to organizational learning by examining the example of academic teaching. Consequently, the “transformational” strategies of best practices that have been used by German universities to achieve teaching excellence are interpreted as double-loop learning. In delineating two exemplary cases of double-loop learning concerning the university-wide implementation of a new teaching formats as part their institutional strategies to develop teaching excellence, the authors want to answer the following research question: Which kind of governance is required to manage double-loop learning processes?

Design/methodology/approach – The purposive sample comprised four universities that had won awards for their teaching excellence. In 2014, a total of 21 semi-structured expert interviews were conducted in these universities within the following status groups: members of the rectorate, full professors, and university management professionals. The coding procedure followed a directed content analysis.

Findings – Both forms of governance are required for the management of double-loop learning. In the case of a top-down instigation of organizational learning, transformational governance is especially required in terms of *idealized influence* and *inspirational motivation*. In the case of a more bottom-up trigger of organizational learning, *intellectual stimulation* becomes more important. Transactional governance is required for the university-wide implementation of new routines (e.g. a mandatory quality management tool, obligatory coaching for newly appointed professors or competitive teaching grants).

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the empirical research on organizational learning in higher education institutions by adding a governance perspective.

Keywords Organizational performance, Governance, Organizational learning, Academic teaching, Higher education studies

Paper type Research paper

This paper offers a new perspective on how to manage organizational learning in higher education institutions (HEIs) by taking the example of academic teaching.

Here, we describe some of the qualitative findings of a multi-method research project[1] that investigated among others into selected, best-practice German universities that have excelled in the highly prestigious, national Competition for Teaching Excellence (CTE, *Wettbewerb Exzellente Lehre*) in 2009. In a two-stage assessment of 110 proposals, six research universities and four universities of applied sciences were awarded with grants of up to one million euros each (Brockerhoff *et al.*, 2014). This competition was the first of its



kind that allowed these universities to benchmark themselves against each other through a teaching excellence organizational approach. Consequently, we paid particular attention to the role of the rectorate in this process to understand and learn from each university's first-hand experiences of how they succeeded in raising the status and importance of teaching at their institution.

In general, the German higher education system (HES) can be described as a soft-governmental regime where no tuition fees or teaching rankings exist. Therefore, the environmental pressure on the organization is not as high as it would be, for example in UK's quasi-market regime (Wilkesmann, 2016). Furthermore, in Germany, the academic freedom of teaching and research is protected by constitutional law—Professors are granted full individual autonomy to conduct their work as they please.

In the organizational learning literature on HEIs, the majority of research can be attributed to the functionalist paradigm where:

Individuals learn as agents of the organization; they seek information that is relevant to organizational goals, and they convert that information into knowledge that can be diffused and stored in organizational systems and operating procedures [...]. The functionalist perspective also seeks to identify the mechanisms that facilitate organizational learning. (Dee and Leišytė, 2016, pp. 285-286)

Its most fundamental framework is Argyris and Schön's (1978) distinction between single-loop learning and double-loop learning. While single-loop learning focuses on "error detection and correction" (Argyris and Schön, 1978, p. 3) in organizational routines without altering the prevailing goals, structure or culture of an organization, double-loop learning involves "the modification of an organization's underlying norms, policies and objectives" (Argyris and Schön, 1978, p. 3).

The superordinate goal of the respective organizational learning processes at these German universities was twofold: the CTE prompted these universities to reflect on the need for more student-focused approaches to teach as well as the need for a measurable desired outcome in terms of organizational performance (such as lowering the dropout rates). The latter could be solved by simple adjustments such as smaller classes or additional tutors and, therefore, can be characterized as single-loop learning. The former changes and questions the underlying pedagogical approaches, existent structures and culture and, therefore, can be characterized as double-loop learning. In this sense, the requirement to enter the CTE can be defined as a binding commitment to engage in a double-loop learning process because these universities had to submit strategic concepts that define their goals in terms of teaching, based on a critical assessment of their past achievements. Consequently, they had to propose institutional strategies and concrete measures on how to significantly increase their visibility and attractiveness as excellent educational institutions for undergraduate students.

The problem that they faced then was how to improve their teaching performance by implementing a process of organizational learning. According to Argyris and Schön (1996, p. 16):

Organizational learning occurs when individuals within an organization experience a problematic situation and inquire into it on the organization's behalf. They experience a surprising mismatch between expected and actual results of action and respond to that mismatch through a process of thought and further action.

However, a perceived mismatch or experience on the individual level does not necessarily lead to organizational learning or change. As previously concluded by Schmid and Lauer (2016), such problematic situations were in many cases experienced by single professors

who were instrumental in initiating and promoting change, which later on was attributed to the university as a corporate actor. For example, one of the rectorates “readily admitted that the success [...] hugely benefited from preliminary efforts of individual actors [...] without whom nothing would and/or could have been achieved” (p. 115). Mainly socialized outside academia, these professors did not accept and adapt to the prevailing routinized practices and mindsets related to teaching at their university, and, instead, they actively looked for solutions to change their situation for the better. As “institutional teaching entrepreneurs” (Schmid and Lauer, 2016), they became the key drivers of successful enterprises, such as developing an award-winning quality tool to enhance curricula or implementing university-wide blended-learning. As emphasized in a previous paper, these preliminary efforts were of course “instrumental but not sufficient in bringing about substantial organizational change” (Schmid and Lauer, 2016, p. 127). For these individual achievements to be promoted on a larger scale, they first had to be aligned to a perceived mismatch on the organizational level. It was only when these learning outcomes became embedded into the structures, strategies, procedures and culture of the university that they were able to inform organizational learning processes in general. Therefore, our main research question is: What kind of governance is required to manage such double-loop learning processes?

We begin by providing an analytic framework where we distinguish the two modes of university governance that are required to support double-loop learning. Next, we give a short description of the sample and the underlying methodology that guided our research. In the main section, we will apply our analytical framework, where we delineate two exemplary cases of double-loop learning that affects the university-wide implementation of new teaching formats. We end this article with a concluding remark on the implications of our findings.

Transformational and transactional governance

In our analytical framework, we broadly define two governance modes with respect to academics (Wilkesmann, 2013, 2016): transactional and transformational governance. Both terms are adapted from the full range leadership model (Bass and Avolio, 1993), and they are used to analyse the general structure that enables certain behaviours within an organization.

Transactional governance is mostly based on “agreements, codes, controls, directions and standard operating procedures” (Wilkesmann, 2016), where members of the organization expect compensation or benefit for processed action and completed tasks. In return — as described in the principle agency theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miller, 2005) — an organization has to make sure that slacking does not occur. Prime examples are selective incentives, including merit pay, management by objectives and formula-based budget for teaching (Wilkesmann and Schmid, 2012).

In contrast, transformational governance aims to create “a sense of purpose and a feeling of family” (Bass and Riggio, 2006, p. 3) within an organization. Therefore, it can be seen as an expansion of transactional governance. Besides contracts and obligations, professors should perceive their institutional environment as one, where:

Commitments are long term. Mutual interests are shared, along with a sense of shared fates and interdependence of leaders and followers. Leaders serve as role models, mentors, and coaches [...]. Leaders and followers go beyond their self-interests or expected rewards for the good of the team and the good of the organization. (Bass and Riggio, 2006, pp. 103-104)

According to Bass’s (1997, p. 133) definition, the components of transformational leadership are as follows:

- *Idealized influence (Charisma)*: Leaders display conviction; emphasize trust; take stand on difficult issues; present their most important values and emphasize the importance of purpose, commitment and the ethical consequences of decisions. Such leaders are admired as role models generating pride, loyalty, confidence and alignment around a shared purpose [. . .].
- *Inspirational motivation*: Leaders articulate an appealing vision of the future, challenge followers with high standards, talk optimistically with enthusiasm and provide encouragement and meaning for needs to be done.
- *Intellectual stimulation*: Leaders question old assumptions, traditions and beliefs; stimulate other new perspectives and ways of doing things and encourage the expression of ideas and reasons.
- *Individualized consideration*: Leaders deal with others as individuals; consider their individual needs, abilities and aspirations; listen attentively; further their development; advise; teach and coach.

Based on our empirical data, we will analyse whether and how both types of governance can support and manage organizational learning processes.

Empirical findings

In the following section, we will apply our analytic framework to two exemplary cases of double-loop learning, which both imply the university-wide implementation of new teaching formats.

Sample and methodology

The purposive sample consisted of four best-practice universities (two research universities [2] and two universities of applied sciences), which were among the winners of the CTE. A comparative case-design approach was used (Yin, 2003).

In contrast to research universities (RU), which are still strongly influenced by the Humboldtian ideal of detached study and scholarship, universities of applied sciences (UAS) provide a more job-specific study programme and pursue a more practice-oriented research. Professors at research universities have a teaching load of roughly 9 hours per week, whereas the teaching load for professors at UAS is twice as high (or over 18 hours per week). To apply for a professorship at a UAS, candidates have to have at least three years of postdoctoral working experience outside academia.

In our study, a total of 21 semi-structured expert interviews were conducted within the following status groups:

- Members of the rectorate (i.e. vice rectors for teaching and learning): $n = 4$;
- Award-winning and/or recommended teaching practitioners: $n = 9$ full professors/faculty deans, $n = 1$ academic senior councillor; and
- Higher education management professionals: $n = 7$ (e.g. heads of centres for the enhancement of teaching and learning, quality assurance staff and project managers).

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 min, which adds up to a total of over 1,760 min of audiotaped and fully transcribed verbal data. The data collection took place between January and May 2014, where all the interviews were originally conducted in German (the

translation into English is our own). The coding procedure followed a directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), where we drew on predetermined codes.

In this article, we will limit our sample to two representative cases because these organizational learning processes can be best interpreted and compared in terms of the overall theme of this article.

Case 1: University of applied sciences

The first case is a large UAS (number of students > 25,000; number of professors > 400) where the organizational learning process and its solution was initiated top-down. At the time when the calls for proposals for the CTE were made public, the vice president for teaching and learning was instructed by the president to develop a university-wide strategy as well as a clear strategic profile for their future educational mission. The perceived mismatch came from that the shift from teaching to learning during the Bologna process — a chance to radically reform study programs with a stronger focus on the acquisition of professional competencies — was only partially successful according to student judgements and the external accreditation review processes.

Although the vice president was still quite new to the position at that time, she could already act out her primary motivation to accept the job. In her own words, she was “able to reshape teaching” (Vice President, UAS) at a very early stage of her period of office and she was also able to counteract this mismatch. Therefore, she successfully pushed her luck within a domain that was unmanned at that time: educational diversity. One crucial element of this institutional strategy was the implementation of mandatory teaching formats in every curriculum to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body with a strong focus on a comprehensive competence-based education. In practice, this meant that every study program was required to include an interdisciplinary project week that is informed by problem-based learning. Additionally, the students were asked to carry out discipline-specific projects in at least five modules of their study program.

According to the vice president, the biggest challenge when implementing these changes in the curricula was to reach out to the staff and to convince them that they will also benefit:

If we can win the students’ hearts from the very beginning through projects that they can elaborate on the weaknesses by themselves, then teaching is more fun. At the beginning, this benefit wasn’t easy to make clear. We got the biggest support from the engineers. Basically they said in the beginning “oh, again something new”, but when I tried to convince them of the benefits, and engineers are characterized by their ability to come up with solutions for problems, when they finally realize, yes we need a solution for this, then you can find a solution. (Vice President, UAS)

These reforms to the university’s current teaching practice were implemented top-down, where the rectorate at first faced problems such as institutional resistance and a lack of cooperation that needed to be addressed. We will discuss these issues in further detail by examining the interplay between transformational and transactional governance in the following sections.

Transformational governance

Transformational governance was essential to convince not only the engineers but also the rest of the academic staff of the importance of this process. In terms of *idealized influence* and *inspirational motivation*, we found a variety of statements reflecting the view that the vice president is truly committed to her agenda to push academic teaching forward at her

university. The university's vision statement is not mere lip service, as can be seen in the following quote:

We know why we are doing it, because we want to equip our students with competences and that is our profile, we want to gain visibility, we want to get external recognition as an excellent teaching institution, also from other universities, we want to have this reputation, we want to occupy this position, that's our profile, that we really implement innovative teaching, not just talk the talk. (Vice Rector, UAS)

The university had several aims in this process, including raising its public profile and gaining recognition for its high teaching standards. It thinks of the problem in terms of reputation and position within the higher education sector. The problem seems to be not just one of improving the teaching standards by fostering innovative teaching but also of improving the university's position and ranking within the sector as a whole.

The following quote from a professor confirms that this vice president is a true role model:

Our vice rector for teaching and learning simply has that charisma, she is authentic, when you see her giving a talk [. . .] you feel that there is so much blood, sweat and tears and you never get the impression "gosh, again one of these lip services", she is really highly committed. Teaching is a very important topic for her and that finds its expression that she is approachable, that she says hi to you, that she tells you something appreciative in the hallway, when she heard about it, there are many examples. (Professor, UAS)

The vice president reported that although the existence of didactical support is vital to implement new teaching routines, a more important reinforcement mechanism with respect to her *idealized influence* and *inspirational motivation* is mutual trust among the rectorate and the faculty deans.

For the last few years, this university has been busy installing more cooperative management structures, which have since become established practice. These cooperative management structures are required to build mutual trust because the faculty deans have to communicate changes and manage their implementation in the respective faculties:

Therefore, you have to integrate the deans into your strategic reasoning. Luckily, we already have faculty deans who share our conviction that a certain kind of team spirit has to evolve. The issues arising at their faculty conferences should be primarily in line with the global strategic aspirations of the university. (Vice President, UAS)

This mutual trust grew because the faculty deans also recognized that members of the rectorate asked for advice and they saw that their decisions are not solely made top-down.

She perceived that this was a learning process and she recalled that there had been many tense meetings where the faculty deans justifiably said that their standpoint was completely ignored, but she reported that these problems had been resolved:

We talked about and tried hard to elaborate on this mutual trust [. . .] now the faculty deans don't say anymore "the rectorate said" but "we want it, because [. . .]". (Vice President, UAS)

One faculty dean, who was a professor of electrical engineering, played a major role in that learning process, as he recalled:

I can claim that I managed to install this way of thinking in all of the deans of the university. At first, they just thought that they have an imperative mandate and only represent their faculty, but now that has changed and all of the deans share the common goals of the rectorate or even develop them and sell them in the faculties, this is a new way of thinking. (Dean, UAS)

To reconcile the different views and overcome possible fears, this dean had completed training as a mediator so that he could learn the necessary professional skills in the learning process.

Moreover, he is an important confidant, advising and supporting the rectorate to install top-down teaching policies. As the vice president put it:

We do everything conceivable, people can contribute and share their opinions, but at some point, we have to clearly draw the boundary and that is the moment where authority comes into play. (Vice President, UAS)

In summary, this university has been able to foster its professoriate by installing a top-down approach that required transformational efforts of persuasion and the creation of a profound basis of trust between the rectorate and the departments. In the next section, we will move on to examine how this university was able to successfully use transactional governance to implement its university-wide reforms to the curricula.

Transactional governance

In terms of transactional governance, this dean also played a key role as an institutional teaching entrepreneur in the whole learning organizational process (Schmid and Lauer, 2016). His main merit for the university was his invention of an award-winning curriculum development tool. Piloted at his faculty, the university later on adapted his invention as a mandatory quality management tool to optimize all curricula in light of the newly introduced teaching formats. According to this professor, together with the vice president, he had considered shutting down some study programmes because the staff were unwilling to integrate the new teaching formats into their curricula. In these rare cases, he said that:

They have to undergo mediation, and then, they have to collaborate over a couple of weekends, and funnily, sometimes, this ends up with really great results. If that is not the case, you have to be consequent and simply pull the plug. (Dean, UAS)

This system appeared to have worked in a majority of cases, although we would caution that simply pulling the plug needs to be explored in more detail before any conclusions can be drawn. In the rare cases where there were single resisters, the threat to excommunicate the respective professor from all teaching duties or even to give them mandatory coaching usually worked.

In general, a rectorate cannot directly command his/her professoriate to participate in didactic training to acquire competences that affects the newly introduced teaching formats. This decision is up to each professor. However, there is a way to make it mandatory, and that is in the case of newly appointed professors. Therefore, this university has implemented a one-year mandatory didactic training that comprises a variety of workshops, peer coaching and the creation of a teaching portfolio, which can be interpreted as a form of transactional governance. At the end of the training, the teaching portfolios have to be presented at an institutionalized exchange platform where they get feedback from the older professors. According to the didactic mentor of the university, this training affects around 30 newly appointed professors per year and the resistance is low.

To conclude, in this best-practice case, double-loop learning was initiated through top-down change strategies to reach a new university-wide goal (i.e. excellence in teaching). The perceived mismatch in current teaching practice arose because the previous efforts to make curricula changes to meet the accreditation review expectations were only partially successful during the Bologna reforms with respect to learning outcomes. Therefore, the current pedagogical approaches were questioned and all of the curricula required major reform with mandatory problem-based learning elements to meet an increasingly diverse

student body. We have shown that both transformational governance (especially *idealized influence* and *inspirational motivation*) and transactional governance (mandatory quality management tool and obligatory coaching for newly appointed professors) are required to successfully implement this kind of top-down organizational learning process.

Case 2: Research University

The second case is a large RU (number of students > 44,000; number of professors > 500) that has taken on a pioneering role in the digitization of academic teaching. Their strategic profile took on a concrete shape after winning the “Excellence Initiative”, where a certain awareness arose that they also needed to work out concrete institutional strategies with respect to their future teaching mission. This insight that planned future investments were rather research-related than teaching-related was perceived as a mismatch in regards to their overall organizational performance.

Even before the call for the CTE was made public, they had already developed a virtually finished concept of their concrete plans of how to achieve excellence in teaching. Accordingly, their primary motivation to win the competition was rather the public recognition and external evaluation of something that was already conceptualized and which had considerable support from a lot of people and was unanimously approved by all of the university committees.

One of the key drivers of the digitization strategy of this university was a professor of ecological engineering, who can be accredited with the university-wide implementation of blended-learning techniques. As the dean in the previous case, he also played the role of an institutional teaching entrepreneur in the organizational learning process because he initially started out to re-think his teaching practices due to his own perceived mismatch between the available standard teaching formats and his own vision of high-quality teaching to get his students’ full attention (Schmid and Lauer, 2016). This professor was trained as an engineer and he had no prior training or expertise on the didactics of teaching. He built on his technical abilities and his solution-oriented pragmatism to continuously advance his teaching services with blended-learning elements. Although there was initially a lack of funding, he started to offer workshops at his faculty to arouse the curiosity of his colleagues. In the meantime, this professor heads a task force of like-minded peers consisting of distinguished experts for blended-learning methods and implementation tools. As a rector’s delegate now he presides over a commission that is in charge of a seven-digit sum to support future blended learning projects. Furthermore, he is often called on to do consultation, interviews or expert talks within and also outside of his university. According to this professor, his efforts could not have spread in such a large-scale manner had there not been a very supportive rectorate:

We are certainly lucky to have somebody like our Vice Rector for Teaching and Learning. He is fantastic; he makes a lot possible. (Teaching Entrepreneur, RU)

In contrast to the first case, this university has been able to foster its teaching staff by installing a bottom-up approach that has mostly relied on one key member of staff to drive the teaching reforms throughout the institution. The following sections will move on to examine how this university was able to successfully use transformational and transactional governance to implement its reforms of teaching.

Transformational governance

The vice rector’s prime motivation to advance teaching to a top priority at this university is mainly spurred by the fact that before his term of office, no one in the rectorate really took

proper care of high-quality teaching at the university. In terms of *idealized influence* and *inspirational motivation*, he stresses that he can only become some kind of role model if he is fully committed to his job as vice rector:

In concrete terms, you have to talk with many people; that is crucial; you have to be present at many assemblies and meetings. You always have to keep it rolling [. . .] and then, you can change something. (Vice Rector, RU)

According to him the interest and trigger to get something off the ground, irrespective of the domain (e.g. research, teaching, gender and diversity), always comes from the individual. Nothing can be achieved by a pure sense of duty, as he affirms with the following statement:

My credo has always been “I don’t believe in committees; I believe in people.” You can launch umpteen committees—when you don’t have someone who really pushes the agenda, nothing will happen. (Vice Rector, RU)

His sincere respect and appreciation of the institutional teaching entrepreneur’s persistence is expressed in the following quote:

If we just had more of his kind in each and every faculty [. . .] we would be doing even better now. With little money, he has pushed this topic early on by constantly putting the issue of blended learning back on the agenda. (Vice Rector, RU)

To spread these efforts on a larger scale, it is first of all important to empower such exceptional personnel by giving them leeway and full backing. It is also important to engage in *intellectual stimulation* to create a university-wide climate to clearly signal that new ideas are welcome and supported. Therefore, the vice rector sees his prime role and duty as promoting such personal efforts and initiatives in providing adequate platforms and occasions (e.g. at the annual day of teaching) so that these ideas can spread on a larger scale.

In the best case, such climate can also trigger a competition for teaching innovativeness where the rectorate simply has to provide:

Platforms to perform and means to deliver a great performance. Where the others are like “wow, I want that too”, this iPhone-brand effect. Everybody wants to have it. And you can install this effect for academic teaching, too. You just have to trigger this competition that there is someone who got teaching skills you don’t have. And you have to be mad at yourself that you don’t have them. I think the biggest difference is that universities haven’t recognized yet, that you have to bring these people together and give them leeway to manoeuvre. (Teaching Entrepreneur, RU)

Although this university was successful in implementing blended learning in their educational mission, this professor still appears to perceive that many universities have not yet found ways to bring innovative teaching staff together and to support them. The next section will draw on such a transactional governance mechanism.

Transactional governance

In terms of transactional governance, this university relies on its inherent high-performance culture to excel in both research *and* teaching. For instance, internal faculty rankings of best lectures and best teaching concepts during each semester are established practice to foster a competition for teaching reputation, “where nobody wants to take a place down below [bottom of ranking]” (Teaching Entrepreneur, RU). Therefore, to incentivize experimentation with innovative teaching methods, such as blended-learning, competitive teaching grants work best in this institutional environment. Over the past few years, this university has had a lot of experience and success in running smaller competitions where a decent number of ideas have already been successfully piloted and experts have been

identified as frontrunners. This university now strives for a larger-scale implementation. To help in this aim, it has provided grants worth millions of euros. Professors can simply apply for play money to experiment with established blended-learning concepts in their discipline:

Where you don't have to be innovative anymore, you don't have to think about something new, because we want to simply scale it now. (Teaching Entrepreneur, RU)

A guideline for the scope of the implementation is set by the rectorate and states:

It would be great if 50 per cent of all content in the undergraduate studies were informed by blended-learning techniques. (Teaching Entrepreneur, RU)

As in the case of the UAS, a relationship of trust and mutual cooperation with the deans of studies is also necessary to foster the implementation of these new teaching formats in the respective faculties. In the annual meeting with the vice rector, every dean has to report on the status quo of blended-learning at their faculty and what improvements still have to be made.

To conclude, the double-loop learning process at this RU was admittedly initiated top-down, but it was not solely triggered this way. As in Case 1, the perceived mismatch on the university level reflected an urgent need for action to improve teaching and learning, which resulted in concrete institutional strategies to reach a new goal to become excellent in both research *and* teaching. In comparison to the first case, in this university, the trigger to re-think current teaching practices and foster its implementation into a university-wide strategy came from the bottom-up, from an institutional teaching entrepreneur who initially worked out a solution (blended-learning) for a perceived mismatch on his own. For this organizational learning process to gain momentum, the rectorate first of all has to be 100 per cent committed to high-quality teaching. In terms of transformational governance, the rectorate has to appreciate, encourage and promote such individual efforts (*idealized influence* and *intellectual stimulation*) and has to ensure that platforms are created where ideas can spread on a larger scale (*intellectual stimulation*). To incentivize the whole professoriate to be part of the institutional teaching mission, transactional governance modes such as competitive teaching grants have to be created.

Concluding remark

The main contribution of this article is to extend [Argyris and Schön's \(1978\)](#) framework with a governance perspective that allows a more in-depth analysis of how double-loop learning processes can be managed in HEIs. However, universities are "specific organizations" ([Musselin, 2007](#)) and can be described as "professional bureaucracies" ([Mintzberg, 1979](#)). The dominant operating core consists of professionals who are more committed to their scientific community than to the organization itself. For this reason, professors are more interested in excelling in research than teaching. In this sense, it is not a trivial task to create any organizational learning process in universities, especially when it is targeted at the occupational group of professors.

Contrary to these predictions, our research shows that organizational learning in universities is possible. Both cases show that organizational learning takes place not only in the form of simple adjustments in terms of single-loop learning but double-loop learning can also occur, guided by different forms of governance. Both of the case universities changed their goal to lower the drop-out rate by shifting from less teacher-focused to more student-focused approaches to teach in the whole organization; in other words, changing the intent of the organizational learning process from single-loop to double-loop learning. We can assume that the professors at UAS can be more easily prompted to change their teaching practice due to the primary organizational goal of

teaching that the case study has revealed. Nonetheless, a double-loop learning process is also possible at RU to achieve teaching excellence. If universities mainly used transactional governance to implement such changes top-down — i.e. without a transformational vision — then academic resistance (Anderson, 2008) would most likely occur.

In general, the governance at universities is more transformational to enable learning at work than at companies. Örtenblad and Koris (2014, p. 198) describe this as follows “Much of the learning at HEIs takes place during work, thus making HEIs, at least to some extent, already learning-at-work organizations. For instance, researchers learn while researching”. At best, such individual learning results could serve as rationales to inform double-loop learning processes as in the case of a network analysis about knowledge transfer within a university (Vogel, 2009).

Ultimately, the universities that we studied have had to decide for themselves if the respective learning outcomes have led to the desired results. Therefore, they have also had to develop suitable criteria and measurements to evaluate the implementation of the results.

As in all studies, we have observed a few limitations in our research. In particular, our study is limited by a small sample size and a focus on the German HES. It is, therefore, recommended that further research should extend the sample, explore other kinds of double-loop learning processes and compare different HESs.

Notes

1. This project was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF): Project-ID 01PY13001.
2. These two research universities also receive substantial monetary funds for their outstanding research performance from the national “Excellence Initiative”, which was launched by the BMBF and the Research and the German Research Foundation (DFG) in 2006.

References

- Anderson, G. (2008), “Mapping academic resistance in the managerial university”, *Organization*, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 251-270.
- Argyris, C. and Schön, D. (1978), *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*, Addison Wesley, Reading, MA.
- Argyris, C. and Schön, D. (1996), *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method and Practice*, Addison Wesley, Reading, MA.
- Bass, B.M. (1997), “Does the transactional–transformational leadership paradigm transcend organizational and national boundaries?”, *American Psychologist*, Vol. 52 No. 2, pp. 130-139.
- Bass, B.M. and Avolio, B.J. (1993), “Transformational leadership and organizational culture”, *Public Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 17, pp. 112-121.
- Bass, B.M. and Riggio, R.E. (2006), *Transformational Leadership*, 2nd ed., Psychology Press, New York, NY.
- Brockerhoff, L., Stensaker, B. and Huisman, J. (2014), “Prescriptions and perceptions of teaching excellence: a study of the national ‘Wettbewerb Exzellente Lehre’ initiative in Germany”, *Quality in Higher Education*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 235-254.
- Dee, J.R. and Leišytė, L. (2016), “Organizational learning in higher education institutions: theories, frameworks, and a potential research agenda”, in Paulsen, M.B. (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, Springer International Publishing, Switzerland, pp. 275-348.

- Eisenhardt, K.M. (1989), "Agency theory: an assessment and review", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 57-74.
- Hsieh, H.F. and Shannon, S.E. (2005), "Three approaches to qualitative content analysis", *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 15 No. 9, pp. 1277-1288.
- Miller, G.J. (2005), "The political evolution of principal-agent models", *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 8, pp. 203-225.
- Mintzberg, H. (1979), *The Structuring of Organizations: A Synthesis of the Research*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Musselin, C. (2007), "Are universities specific organisations?", in Krücken, G., Kosmützky, A. and Torke, M. (Eds), *Towards a Multiversity? Universities between Global Trends and National Traditions*, Verlag, Bielefeld, pp. 63-84.
- Örtenblad, A. and Koris, R. (2014), "Is the learning organization idea relevant to higher educational institutions? A literature review and a multi-stakeholder contingency approach", *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 28 No. 2, pp. 173-214.
- Schmid, C.J. and Lauer, S. (2016), "Institutional (teaching) entrepreneurs wanted!: considerations on the professoriate's agentic potency to enhance academic teaching in Germany", in Leisyte, L. and Wilkesmann, U. (Eds), *Organizing Academic Work in Higher Education: Teaching, Learning and Identities*, Routledge, London, pp. 109-131.
- Vogel, M.P. (2009), "Exploring the conditions for academic teachers' informal collegial learning about teaching: a social network approach", *Educate*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 18-36.
- Wilkesmann, U. (2013), "Effects of transactional and transformational governance on academic teaching: empirical evidence from two types of higher education institutions", *Tertiary Education and Management*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 281-300.
- Wilkesmann, U. (2016), "Teaching matters, too: different ways of governing a disregarded institution", in Leisyte, L. and Wilkesmann, U. (Eds), *Organizing Academic Work in Higher Education: Teaching, Learning and Identities*, Routledge, London, pp. 33-54.
- Wilkesmann, U. and Schmid, C.J. (2012), "The impacts of new governance on teaching at German universities: findings from a national survey", *Higher Education*, Vol. 63 No. 1, pp. 33-52.
- Yin, R.K. (2003), *Case Study Research. Design and Methods*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

About the authors

Sabine Lauer, Dipl. Soc., MSc, holds a major in sociology and statistics. She is currently a PhD Candidate and a Research Assistant to the Chair of Organizational Studies, Continuing Education and Social Management, Center for Higher Education (zhb) at the TU Dortmund University. Sabine Lauer is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: sabine.lauer@tu-dortmund.de

Uwe Wilkesmann, Prof Dr, is Chair of Organization Studies, Management of Continuing Education, and Social Management. He is Director of the Center for Higher Education (zhb), TU Dortmund University.

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com