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Chapter VII

Revealing Unseen Organizations in Higher Education:

A Study Framework and Application Example

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Abstract

Structuration theory, which examines the relationship between local and institutional structures, and organizational theory specific to the higher education setting, are utilized to formulate an analytical framework appropriate for "reading" educational technologies as social phenomena. Wanda Orlikowski's (2000) technology-in-use model, (a contemporary revision of Poole and DeSanctis' [1990] adaptive structuration model) and Burton Clark's (1984) taxonomy of higher education organization are applied as the foundation for the inquiry.

Introduction

In the higher education setting, changes in management practices, organizational structure, and communication technologies have provoked considerable speculation about the future of academic institutions. Many experts are asking if the centuries-old traditions of the university system will survive the information age, and if not, what the new paradigms for higher learning will be (Brown & Duguid, 1996; Duderstadt, 2000; Frye, 2002; Johnstone, 2002; Katz, 2002; Strauss, 2002; Wulf, 2003). Though often presented as vague forms that we will discover far out into some distant future, 21st century higher learning organizations already exist. Discerning their forms, however, can be challenging. Adopting a new conception of technology—one that highlights its dynamic relationship with social interaction—may help to reveal largely "unseen" higher education organizations.

Course management (CM) systems are a prime example an emerging form of higher education that has not yet been recognized as such. Generally, those who have adopted these technologies understand them as tools that facilitate communication within and between existing organizations, rather than as new forms of HE enterprise. If we consider the possibility that these technologies may represent not only new technologies but also new systems of social organization, then the dramatic increase in adoption of CM systems warrants close attention.

CM uses crosses the boundaries of diverse academic disciplines, widely divergent service sectors, and international borders. Over 50 different CM systems are currently being employed in colleges and universities—the leading system in the industry serving over 5.6 million users (Rosen, 2002)—and more systems are on the way. For instance, MIT and a select group of partners have been hard at work developing the next generation CM system: the Open Knowledge Initiative (OKI) and the companion Open Courseware (OCW) project. If we are to understand these new technologies as emerging organizational systems, rather than simply as technologies that are "external" to existing systems, we can understand MIT's work as a potentially critical influence in the current restructuring of higher education. Indeed, the group has openly stated their intention for these systems to have both a profound and far-reaching effect on the future of HE (OKI Web site, 2003). Given this goal, the development of these technologies should be accompanied by careful analysis. This paper aims to contribute to this imperative by proposing a study framework for