

Research strategy: one goal, two discourses

In discussions about how to improve the research output of an institution, a discipline or a country, there are often two discourses at work. One speaks in technocratic terms about maximizing output. The other speaks in process-orientated terms about fostering a research culture. From the creative tension between these two, workable ways forward are sometimes found. However, more often than not the technocratic idiom is allowed to dominate the discussion, with a plethora of terms and phrases that are becoming increasingly familiar. It might go something like this:

“...there need to be clearly articulated and specified benchmarks to which people are held accountable.... where unsustainable practices not contributing to the bottom line would be eliminated....there needs to be an emphasis on quality assurance with appropriate rewards and incentives for those achieving requisite standards...”

There is much to be said for this sort of talk. It is upfront and transparent about what is required, and very easily translates into practical mechanisms for ensuring greater productivity. Unfortunately, there is also a downside. In pursuit of measurable targets one often ends up with shallow definitions of what it means to be productive. This sort of discourse strips away social and political contexts and reifies power relations, making historically contingent circumstances appear as if they were natural and inevitable. It uses extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivators, leading to dependence and compliance rather than to creative engagement. It promotes bureaucracy.

The technocratic discourse would view research productivity in terms of peer reviewed publications, with the pinnacle of academic achievement apparently being that of attaining the status of “sole author” - a product of a system of individual punishments and rewards and the Western cult of individual rationality. It would be a sad day if all of academia

becomes like this. While it is true that peer reviewed publication is currently the most definitive marker of academic status, there are also voices protesting against the superficiality of publish-or-perish. There are many who feel that other forms of intellectual productivity should also be subsidized, and that the undue emphasis on only subsidizing publications may lead to the trivialization rather than the promotion of academia.

What about the real reasons why people become productive researchers? Maybe not the reward of money or fear of job loss, but passion and joy and a sense of achievement; a sense of being committed to particular values, causes or ideals; a desire to contribute to a wider community of practice. This is the other discourse, the muted one, which speaks in process orientated terms of fostering a research culture and making it possible and worthwhile for young researchers to become part of a community of practice. Admittedly it is hard to speak of process because it sounds so woolly, fostering organic growth rather than imposing rational plans. Moreover, how does one make links to practical mechanisms? Such challenges should invigorate, not stymie.

Managers have legitimate concerns about institutional standing and output. In this regard the technocratic drive to establish minimum performance criteria and accountability has utility. But we should resist getting stuck in carrot and stick approaches and invest creative energy in re-imagining and collaboratively building a vibrant culture of academic enquiry as individuals, together with students and beyond our own institutions.

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