

The use of the loose coupling theory



Loose coupling theory proposes that different parts of an organization are loosely related to one another. This can be understood as that different divisions of an organization are loosely coupled with one another, i. e. activities in the higher education department are loosely coupled to those in the English department – activities in one department have a minimal impact, or take a long time to show up, in the other. The main thesis of his article is to argue that there are seven pros and corresponding cons of loose couplings. According to Weick (1976), loose coupling is a cognitive response to an environment of constant change, in which connections, networks, diffusion, imitation, and social comparison are less prevalent. The loose coupling systems (LCSs) are uncoordinated and have greater differentiation among components, high degrees of specialization among workers, and low predictability of future action, including change. In general, loosely coupled systems probably are cheaper to coordinate, but are very difficult to systematically change. The goal of Weick's article is to show that all organizations do not function with tight linkages — some organizations, like educational systems, are more loose, which may create more difficult problems for researchers.

The loosely coupled approach has a strong parallel in more recent approaches to viewing organizations as complex systems, which has attracted considerable interest among management and organizational theorists. Birnbaum argues that complex systems such as collegial or bureaucratic institution models provide insights to the analysis of LCSs. Complex systems are bottom-up phenomena, also defined as systems comprising large numbers of agents in highly connected webs, can display

both high levels of order and disorder. Importantly, order in complex systems is usually a result of micro-structuring processes that provide for robust self-organization. This form of order is not dependent on hierarchical control but is distributed, and it can lead to system-wide stability (or instability).

Complex systems do well when they engage in a search for healthier and better-off states, otherwise searches are directed from the top down, and system will likely settle into only moderately fit states. Also systems must be relatively free to interact with other systems until good fitting strategies are found. Complex systems have slow response times not because they are any slower than simpler systems in detecting environmental threats and opportunities, but because the process of adjustment takes longer.

Educational systems demonstrate considerable robustness and resilience in the face of both environmental and intended change, thus the key is to focus on relationships and the building of similar behavior based around trust.

Weick (1976) notes that more loosely coupled organizations offer advantages in complex environments. More autonomous groups may be more sensitive to environmental change, and offer more simultaneously adaptation to conflicting demands at the institutional level. If problems develop in one part of the system, it can be sealed off from the rest of the system. Efforts to create a less loosely coupled system or to control and centralize have not altered the overall complex system, which still remains loosely coupled.

The concept of LCS is crucial to Rhoades' argument about strategic activity. While Weick's strengths and challenges related to LCSs are positioned in difficulties to change organizations systematically, Rhoades' approach calls

for development of strategic activity through managerialism. Rhoades emphasizes that managerialism and market approaches are two sets of ideas that recently have influenced educational decision-making processes. The problem with these ideas, especially in loosely tight educational organizations, is that although it provided some change, it may not provide a basis for future improvement in education, especially in student learning. Within this model there is an assumption that there is a tight coupling between education policy (e. g. curriculum) and how teachers teach. Where improved performance is sought it is pursued through the manipulation of formal mechanisms such as rules, procedures, rewards or changed evaluation. Bureaucratic hierarchies have however been increasingly criticized for being non-responsive and inefficient means for organizing public administration. With respect to education, they have certainly proven resistant to change. Managerial initiative is important to Rhoades in moving the universities forward, which is in contrast with loose couplings assumption where planned change has a low predictability as is unlikely to be successful within loose coupling environment.

Loose coupling concept also poses some problems for leaders who want to change their organizations. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) were well aware of this problem of change in loosely coupled systems. They argued that administrators could get around it by finding ways to tighten the coupling patterns in their organizations, such as reorganization and stabilization of exchange relationships. The idea was to reduce internal and external variability in the system so that it could be more easily controlled. Thus, loosely coupled organizations can embrace change because its impact is

limited. For instance, the English department can change without any punishment if no other departments are affected by its changes – the loosely coupled organization as a whole isolates and neutralizes disturbance; however, change is slow. External as well as internal influences are absorbed by this organizational structure. So, the individual departments are not themselves typically difficult to change; rather, the problem lies in getting the entire organization to change, in diffusing the change across the networks. Birnbaum (1988) clearly articulates that to strengthen academic leadership, one must reform structures, adopt more rationalized management systems, and increase the power of executive leadership to make faster, more efficient, and more effective decisions,” but for leadership to be effective within LCS, communication has to be present as a sense of general openness in institutional governance and climate. Leaders create organized disorder in which dynamic things happen at multiple locales within the system, thus creating a new behavior rather than controlling organizational activities. Also, the application of data to interaction permits information to influence preferences and possibilities, and that leads to decisions grounded in reality. It is not only about collection, analysis, and dissemination of data, but also about different constituents being interested in that data and how it interacts (Birnbaum, 1988). The interaction leads not only to positive administrative decision-making, but also to being rational and looking for consensus among loosely coupled units. Complex organizations cannot function effectively over the long term without leaders to coordinate the activities, represent them, and symbolize the institutional purpose (Birnbaum, 1988).

As to administrative decision-making, Weick (1976) notices that LCSs are difficult to change systematically, thus any decision-making change that has to be discussed will encounter a problem of systematic change. The issue with implementation of any administrative change will always come down to the fact that teaching is isolated work and improving instruction is strictly a matter of individual initiative. Thus, the problem with administrative decision-making in LCS is that colleges do not show any collective impact on student learning. The problem with it is also that decision-making is explicitly and directly concerned with the instructional core of education by arguing that educational institutions and their faculty and staff need to be accountable for student learning. Moreover, loose coupling implies that “ the source of an effect may be located at a considerable distance in time or organizational structure from the effect itself, thus amplification of non-linear cycles makes it possible for an insignificant decision to have a major effect as it moves through the system over time” (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 71).

Birnbaum describes this as “ butterfly effect” and indicates that cause and effect are difficult to predict or determine in loose coupling model. Moreover, circular systems that he describes may also imply about administrative decision-making. He encourages thinking in circles as thinking of unintended consequences that may arise with complexity of how things interact.

Although, institutional prestige, faculty morale, student enrollment, and sense of community are crucial for this model, the feedback loops are missing from this model as well as culture of the organization. Also, local adaptations will not always assist with generating efficient responses to system-wide challenges in a decision-making process. Loose coupling implies slow diffusion of central initiatives. As a consequence, the administrator

would have to start projects earlier, start more projects, start projects in a greater variety of places, and even talk more frequently about those projects that have been started. The perspective of educational systems as being loosely coupled seems to be weak at explaining one major decision making fact that approaches to schooling have remained remarkably uniform across geography and time. If education systems are loosely coupled, diverse practices should emerge in response to differing local needs and differing ideas about education. Loose coupling can account for the diversity of ways in which units implement different decisions; for instance, the RCM is the way to find innovative options to strengthen individual units where the center does not correlate with units (Rhoades, 2000). In order to improve administrative decision-making, the administrator should emphasize the role of interaction among an organization's members, as well as collaboration and negotiation as methods to determine how decisions should be carried.

2. The Mode 2 knowledge production model is perhaps the most well-known term used to indicate the impact of changes for the university sector.

Gibbons et. al.(1994) in the mid-1990s presented their Mode 2 theory saying that university researchers, who previously most often worked on internal disciplinary Mode 1 problems, were now more inclined to involve themselves closely in industrial and governmental research collaborations. Economical factors were seen to be the drivers, as closer relations between university research and industry developed to meet competition from the growing economies. This trend prompted new organizations such as think tanks or hybrid organizations, which often were places where the new front research was to be found. Gibbons et. al. referred to these as Mode 2 organizations,

seeing them as generic for the whole research landscape. It seems that Mode 2 model especially in research area was a result of a general economic development towards post-industrialism. Moreover, mode 2 knowledge production model is application-based, and can be explored in an interdisciplinary fashion. As such, the emergence of Mode 2 production would not eclipse Mode 1 methods entirely. In a resource-seeking environment, Mode 2 would likely be more attractive to outside funding agencies and investors due to its application-based principles. Mode 2 may not lead to increased social accountability – rather than being held to social values, Mode 2 knowledge would respond to market values, thus will privilege certain kinds of knowledge over others. In this sense, Mode 2 is related to academic capitalism that proposes market-relevant knowledge production.

From an academic capitalism perspective, Mode 2 can have a tendency to focus on disciplines with well-known possibilities for commercial use, i. e. technology and medicine, whereas other disciplines may be mostly ignored. By the same token, since both concepts are normative, the system of norms may be well affected especially among traditional researchers within social sciences. In this area, internal interests for research questions seem to be far away from industry's interest for commercial products or the government's interest for useful results. However, one can make an argument supporting Mode 2 and somehow against the notions of academic capitalism. It has to be noticed that Mode 2 would not push research outside of the university, but rather that applied science and the facilities for training researchers would make university-industry relations stronger. For instance, the Bayh-

Dole Act of 1980 and related intellectual property legislation profoundly affected the commercial potential of government-sponsored research and still allowed research to be conducted within the realm of universities' walls. Thus, technology transfer was quite symbolic and the Act was a step toward developing a social exchange between university science and society. In this sense, Mode 2 can be seen as a positive engine that transformed the public research model. Moreover, knowledge production is crucial because knowledge society seen through the lens of academic capitalism would focus more on the activities of higher education institutions in the two countries in a particular regional sphere. Thus, the argument may take us to propositions of globalization and internationalization.

A critique that may arise from academic capitalism proponents is the fact that there is no support for a merger of interests between researchers and industry. Researchers at the institutes (or centers of excellence) instead devote their precious time to a shorter research perspective that is strictly coming from the industry or directed toward it. This process was seen as influenced by reductions in state-support, an explanation quite close to the one put forward by Slaughter & Leslie (1997). Thus, Mode 2 may jeopardize a strictly public focus of research universities when these start heavily getting involved with the industry. Even though Mode 2 involves multidisciplinary teams brought together for short periods of time to work on specific problems in the real world, this concept, from strictly academic capitalism critique, may not show any organizational diversity, which is at the core of academic capitalism. Also, academic capitalism may criticize Mode 2 as a concept of political ideology rather than a descriptive theory that academic

capitalism claims to be. As for similarities, both concepts apply that there are three major actors in science – university, industry and government – and these extend beyond their former specific areas and change their former roles in closer collaborations for the benefit of economic development of society, thus academic capitalism partly confirms the claims of rising Mode 2.

From the perspective of institutional theory, Mode 2 is a problem related to institutional structures. From an institutional theory standpoint, there are templates for organizing institutions that are implicitly understood and translated to new members of an organization. Moreover, these templates are interpretive schema, underlying values and assumptions, similar to mental models (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). Templates of institutional behavior create resistance to change. One concept within the institutional theory that has regularly been applied to higher education institutions to explain change is institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), which suggests that institutions do not change as a result of a competitive market, external pressures or efficiency, but rather through the force of homogenization, striving to be like other types of colleges perceived to be elite. Mode 2 contrasts with institutional theory in the sense of the concept of change because influence of market and other external forces (such as NGOs or TNOs) create a high degree of heterogeneity among institutions. Institutional isomorphism also suggests that institutions tend not to be distinctive in their identity development or image, while Mode 2 emphasizes on organizations that do not have to necessarily conform to the rules and belief systems prevailing in the existing environment. For instance,

older and well-established universities with strong cultures will have more specific power to resist change, while other institutions may be more vulnerable to market ideas. Since universities are complex and conflicted organizations, the institutional isomorphism that is projected by institutional theory may be one of the limitations of this theory to encourage distinctiveness and diversity of HED institutions.

A critique that might arise from the institutional theory perspective is that the institutions have to learn to share their resources (physical, intellectual and financial) with other kinds of knowledge producing institutions. According to Janson (2002), this task may be very difficult to accomplish considering that universities have held the monopoly among knowledge producers. Mode 2 is a threat to this status quo by encouraging alliances as well as collaborative relationships with other knowledge producers. Another critique from an IT standpoint is that Mode 2 would change standards of evaluation and accreditation as well as success and progression that would encourage more of a multidisciplinary context. For IT proponents, disciplinary boundaries are important, thus not only is traditional career path model being challenged by Mode 2, but also the nature of the undergraduate curriculum. Mode 2 is not the only knowledge production model that is challenging the more traditional, basic sciences model, but globalization and internationalization as well. According to Gibbons (1994), knowledge is “transdisciplinary, problem-oriented, application-based, team-driven, multi-sited, partnership-based, socially useful, heterogeneous, quality controlled, reflective and responsive, and less hierarchical than disciplinary knowledge of the kind produced in universities,” that is being characterized as typically

centered on disciplines, with academic hierarchies, more norm-concentrated, authoritative in regards to social behavior as well as concerned with homogeneity.

Another critique is that it will be hard to protect academia from worldwide economic trends as well as production of knowledge in purely economic terms. Because Mode 2 is strictly defined in economic terms, all institutions may have a tendency for duplication and may follow one economic trend in order to survive. Scott (1995) indicates that, in order to survive, organizations must conform to the rules and belief systems prevailing in the environment because institutional isomorphism, both structural and procedural, will earn the organization legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The institutional theory claims that change is less likely to happen within or among organizations, while Mode 2 encourages change especially toward the private sector being more entrepreneurial and challenging the traditional values found especially in higher education institutions. While institutional theory supports traditional values of HED institutions, Mode 2 encourages growth of those hybrid organizations that capitalize on connections to teaching, research, and service.

4. The most important differentiation is that the concepts of globalization and internationalization that are characterized by glonacal agency heuristic (GAH) are situated above the level of nation-state. GAH as a method of thought focuses on institutions, positions, agency, and structure at three levels: national, local, and global. The concept focuses on colleges and universities (and units and faculty within them) as global agents, encouraging studies of activity and stratification regionally and

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internationally. However, it is not a method of positioning yourself relative to others. Globalization is not universal, because it does not feel the same for everyone, thus it is not inevitable. In this respect, globalization is uneven and asymmetrical.

Moreover, the pressure that it is felt as an institution most of the time mediates. For instance, even if the pressure comes from a national or global context, the local arena may be able to mediate things. For instance, Raytheon company has a heavy involvement on the University of Arizona, however does not have hardly any on Pima Community College. On the other hand, the PCC has a pressure from auto repair industry in cooperation with Jim Click to have mechanics to fix cars. Thus, GAH provides a different response of institutions to globalization. It seems that for GAH there is no separation between globalization and internationalization because both are a total of complex interactions of human and institutional agencies at local, national, and global levels. Marginson and Rhoades (2002) define two types of agency: human agency and institutional agency. For them, it is all about positioning things not individuals. For instance, a supranational agency such as the World Bank has an impact in developing countries, and the whole impact is being driven by market forces; thus individuals do not shape the globalization process. It takes a lot of agencies to understand what is going on and understand and find a point of where we could resist the impact. According to GAH there is limited analysis of the complex agencies and processes that define them; no global dimension to analyze yet. Thus, with it more comparative studies need to be conducted to know human agency better and also local dimensions – institutions and agents. While depicting

GAH, the authors base their concept on Clark's description of academic profession that is structured by a triangle, in which market-state is a starting point, from which everything spills over to disciplines and professions as well to government and management. Knight (2004) replies to this issue with the process of internationalization that is supposed to be happening on a continuum basis. Her concept of internationalization is characterized similar to Clark's description as a triangle, in which interactions may be of hexagonal shape, but the whole process of internationalization will happen on a continuum basis. For Knight, globalization/internationalization is binary and is an omnipresent force that institutions have to respond to. It is similar to the Newtonian account of action and reaction. However, unlike Marginson and Rhoades, she is interested in institutions' approaches (the ways in which they internationalize) and their rationale (why you are doing it – explanations and goals), and how they interconnect (by preparing students to exist in global society or bringing in faculty from around the world). Thus, reciprocity is of important value to this concept. It is up to you how you are changing the world. So in that sense, Knight disagrees with Marginson and Rhoades that there is opportunity for everyone to progress.

It is worth mentioning that the concept of internationalization is often confused with globalization (Altbach, 2004). The main difference is that globalization may not be unalterable, but internationalization is a process involving many choices. Globalization tends to concentrate wealth, knowledge, and power in those already possessing these elements, thus diminishing the importance of peripheries. International academic mobility similarly favors well-developed education systems and institutions, thereby

compounding existing inequalities. Initiatives and programs, coming largely from the north, are focused on the south. The key here is that Altbach summarizes programs and activities relevant to the American study abroad tradition while Knight emphasizes on internationalization as a process. For Knight, internationalization is a two-way street that serves important needs. For Altbach, the concept is focused largely on the south-north spectrum, where students move primarily from south to north, where north controls the process. In this sense, Altbach's approach is based on radical dependency theory that relies on neo-colonialism core. Also, I got an impression that Knight's concept of internationalization is not focused on economic (mostly financial) ends. Instead, internationalization is supposed to enhance research, knowledge, and cultural understanding. For instance, one of the initiatives may include study-abroad experiences or enrichment of curriculum through offering a major in international studies or other area studies. Deeply in the core, it does not seem that the process is intended to bring financial profits, but strategically implemented will enhance competitiveness and institutional prestige. However, the process itself, if not controlled, may focus too much on institutional strategies and policies while excluding national governments. In the same aspect, I could sense a tint of skepticism in Altbach's approach in regards to an economic trend of globalization. Even though he acknowledges the trend and claims it is inevitable, he emphasizes on negative aspects of internationalization as a process that will further diminish the intellectual as well as cultural sides within the developing countries.

In addition, Knight's definition of internationalization seems to limit itself to the teaching function of the institution by concentrating on the expansion of international curriculum. Although both articles of Altbach and Knight are written in the same year, it seems that Altbach hardly mentions supranational organizations while Knight already acknowledges the new trend proclaiming that not only institutions and national policy makers alone are driving the internationalization, but supranational organizations as well. The tendency for Knight is to look at challenges that globalization presents us from an insider perspective – how institutions as well as individuals react to globalization through internationalization, while Altbach's approach can be seen from the outsider perspective that acknowledges institutions, but not the processes and individuals within.