

## 7

*Cultural and symbolic processes—that is, communication—quite frequently play as important a role as structural issues in enabling effective governance.*

## A Cultural Perspective on Communication and Governance

*William G. Tierney, James T. Minor*

“I find it ironic,” said one professor, “that you can be a faculty member here and never hear from the senate. You would think there would be some correspondence, or the representative from your school would come to faculty meetings to provide some indication of what the senate is doing.” The professor’s observation is on target. The role of communication in the governance of academic organizations is frequently underestimated or, more likely, ignored. Instead, studies of governance generally involve structural or role-related analysis. Some scholars discuss the strengths and weaknesses of an academic senate or assembly, for example, and consider its size, composition, and functions in relation to its effectiveness. Others evaluate the relative power of a particular position within a governing body, such as the presidency, or the role of mid-level functionaries, such as department chairs or deans.

In this chapter we consider the role of communication in academic governance. We suggest that to become more effective in governance, faculty should focus on communicative strategies in addition to structural reforms. All too often, however, when faculty believe that their power is diminished or that their voice is limited, they argue solely for structural changes to one or another academic body. Although we do not dispute that on some campuses an overhaul of a decision-making body such as an academic senate is useful, we assert that it is necessary to consider the interpretive potential of organizational life. Colleges and universities are not simply the sum of the structural units that produce and disseminate knowledge within them; they are also places where symbolic and abstract cultural

meanings are created. From an interpretive perspective, these symbols and meanings are in part the byproduct of the cultural processes that an organization's actors create in communicating with one another. It is these processes and communicative acts that we wish to consider here. We argue that the culture of the organization determines communication, and that communication helps constitute governance.

Our two reference points for analysis are a survey of shared governance that included 763 institutions and a group of eight case studies of four-year colleges and universities. We begin with an overview of the communicative frameworks of governance and then discuss three central aspects of communication: situated meaning, speech and literacy events, and symbols and ceremonies. The goals of the chapter are to highlight the ways in which people communicate with one another and to suggest that communication is a key component of successful shared governance.

### **Governance by Conversation**

Lewis B. Mayhew (1974) wrote the following about the governance structure of the modern university: "In one sense the governance of [the] university is governance by conversation. Many of the seemingly critical matters, such as the form of the curriculum or even the size of the budget . . . are the subject of thousands of hours of consultation and conversation before a final decision is ratified" (p. 58). Indeed, it would be impossible to chart how decisions are made in a traditional college or university. Unlike in a business, where an organizational map can at least approximate the path of decision making, at a college or university ideas rarely follow a specific route to their implementation. When one looks, for example, at the issues before faculty senates at different colleges and universities, one finds that issues vary among institutions and even within institutions from one year to the next. Further, at some institutions senates are key faculty-governing bodies, while at other locales they are inconsequential or non-existent (Tierney and Minor, 2003). In a universe of four thousand postsecondary institutions, one certainly can expect a degree of variability among senates. In some senates, for example, all faculty are included, while in others faculty are represented by academic unit or popular vote. In some cases executive committees are chosen by the entire faculty, in others they are selected by the senate itself. Some senate presidents are elected faculty members, while others are the president or academic vice president of the institution.

Structurally, then, one cannot anticipate that a specific governing body will deal with particular issues regardless of institutional type or context. Among institutions, however, the delineation of formal faculty voice is relatively clear. More than 75 percent of the respondents to the survey stated that faculty had substantial influence in determining undergraduate curriculum, standards for promotion and tenure, and standards for the evaluation of

teaching. There was equal agreement among participants that faculty had relatively little formal influence in setting budget priorities or evaluating the president and provost. Perceptual indicators, however, show divergent views. For example, when asked about the quality of communication among campus constituents in decision making, 88 percent of academic vice presidents agreed that it was good, or sufficient to make progress, compared to just 66 percent of faculty who agreed.

Although faculty claimed to have little formal influence in certain types of decisions, they reported having considerable informal influence. Both formal and informal influence were evident in many different types of governance structures. Although more than 85 percent of all four-year institutions have some form of a faculty-governing body, most individuals reported academic departments, standing faculty committees, and ad-hoc committees as substantial venues for participation. One faculty member of twenty-six years responded: "Like many other institutions, we make decisions based on the outcomes of multiple formal and informal conversations."

One commonsense observation of this process is that, among organizations, structures vary a great deal. Regardless of which venues are employed for deliberations by faculty, decisions are reached through communicative processes that take place within and outside those structures. Our point here is more than simply to assert that one group communicates by formal pathways and another by informal means. We suggest that the manner in which groups communicate with one another highlights underlying cultural beliefs within the organization. In turn, the way in which a college or university's actors create the culture of the organization determines a host of critical issues pertaining to the faculty's role in governance.

Accordingly, if it is determined that faculty voice should be increased or taken more seriously in the governance of an institution, then an appropriate strategy for achieving this goal would be to consider the communicative processes employed within the organization. One fruitful way to analyze organizational communication is to consider how meaning is situated, what constitutes speech and literacy events, and how communicative symbols and ceremonies are used and by whom. As will become clear, each of these ideas frames an understanding of how communication functions as a cultural process within an organization.

**Situated Meaning.** Linguists have defined *situated meaning* as an understanding of the specific context that is transformed and negotiated by rules of speaking, which reflect the actors' relationships to, and attitudes toward, one another and the issues under consideration (Hymes, 1974). Although rules exist in any institution, in an academic organization populated by highly verbal participants who frequently seek to understand underlying structures, they are particularly important. Thus, we need to come to terms not only with the contexts in which communication takes place, such as a faculty senate, and the actors involved in the specific structure, such as

a senate president, but also with the wider sociopolitical structures in which the communicative processes are embedded.

Investigations of shared governance need to move away from purely structural or outcome-related analysis. Looking only to a senate, for example, to define the types of issues that will be addressed ignores the ways in which messages are created by the organization's culture. Similarly, to argue simply that the faculty's power and authority can be gauged by decisions made in a senate or committee is to disregard the idea that communication transcends decisions and outcomes. No one has ever plausibly advanced the argument that any one system of shared governance is better than the rest, nor has anyone demonstrated that a particular system necessitates that faculty bodies formally vote on all issues that come before it.

To consider the situated meaning of communication, one must identify who is and who is not involved in governance, the venues where governance takes place, and the formal and informal means used to communicate. Such an approach has broad implications for the study and analysis of shared governance. Studies of academic decision making frequently describe faculty governance in either-or terms: either an institution has an effective faculty senate or its system of faculty governance is a sham. Rather than assume that everyone must participate in faculty governance for it to be effective, we posit that the history, culture, and present contexts of an institution frame governance in important ways. What Clark (1970) defined as a "distinctive college" (p. 234), for example, might have active faculty involvement on myriad topics, whereas a research university might seek faculty engagement in only a handful of issues. A campus with collective bargaining is likely to communicate in ways quite different from a campus without such an agreement. The point of our analysis is not to determine the best structure of governance for all institutions, or to imply that certain roles must have more authority. Instead, we seek to explore how an organization's participants make meaning based on the confines of the institutional context.

**Literacy and Speech Events.** A literacy event takes place when a piece of writing plays an integral role in shaping meaning and interactions among participants. Speech events are oral in nature and surround literacy events. As Heath (1982) has noted, "Speech events may describe, repeat, reinforce, expand, frame or contradict written materials, and participants must learn whether the oral or written mode takes precedence in literacy events" (p. 93). Obviously, in an academic community a wealth of literacy events takes place, and speech events circumscribe organizational decisions. With the advent of Web sites and the Internet, literacy events have increased dramatically, just as conference calls and voice-activated referencing have led to an increase in speech events. A student newspaper, a faculty forum, a university newspaper, a senate Web page, and the minutes and agenda for meetings are examples of literacy events. Each piece of writing pertains to some aspect of decision making. It informs various constituencies about

either decisions to be made or actions taken. Writing may be used to explain actions, to argue for or against a particular idea, or to inform debate. Written materials help shape an argument.

Speech events generally take place with participants face-to-face and involve literacy events. Individuals may refer to a text or extrapolate from it, confer individually or as a group, and so on. They might speak formally or informally. An example of a formal speech act that involves a literacy event would be the approval of meeting minutes with changes to the written text suggested orally by a committee member. An example of an informal speech event that involves literacy events could be the gossip or conversation that occurs before or after a meeting about a memo that has been sent or received.

Speech and literacy events, then, are oral and written messages communicated to an organization's constituencies. Such messages have distinct temporal frames. They can be divided into four types: preparational, presentational, preservational, and promotional. Each event has not only a distinct time frame but also a purpose within that time frame. For example, before making necessary changes to the institution, a group may utilize a Web page to develop white papers that discuss why the faculty need to revamp general education. Or, perhaps, when a presentation is being prepared for a curricular affairs committee, ideas for specific changes may be debated among faculty. Once decisions of any type are made, a faculty handbook may be amended to create institutional memory of the revision. Finally, one may utilize a literacy event to promote and communicate decisions that have been made by the governing body. Such analysis enables us to understand how members make use of particular documents and materials within governance.

When analyzing literacy and speech events, the roles of central and peripheral actors need to be considered. This information is particularly important with regard to shared governance because speech events occur between speakers and listeners. Similarly, a literacy event is an interaction over a text that someone has written and someone reads. Consider, for example, perhaps the most serious action an academic community might contemplate: the removal of an individual faculty member's tenure. Numerous literacy events come into play—the faculty handbook, the institution's grievance policy, and all documents pertaining directly to the case. The dismissal proceedings and the hearings of the case are examples of speech events. In analyzing these speech events, it is necessary to consider carefully who instigates the proceedings and who is involved in the hearings. These events are not disembodied scripts devoid of speakers, listeners, authors, and readers. If a faculty committee brings forth a cause for dismissal, the meaning of the scripts may well differ from those if the administration were to do the same. Literacy and speech events inevitably are defined by the situated meaning infused by an organization's actors, history, and culture.

In one light, the kind of analysis described here does little more than state the obvious: minutes are taken at senate meetings, and individuals make oral changes to written documents that are then preserved. A university president's memo to the faculty about general education carries different meanings than an assistant professor's message on a faculty listserv. In this chapter, however, we argue a different point. Shared governance is more than a functional analysis of whether faculty members vote on a particular issue or whether a certain clause exists in the faculty handbook to guarantee protections. Shared governance is a cultural undertaking that reinscribes what the academic community believes about itself. These beliefs help define the speakers, listeners, authors, and readers of speech and literacy events. Just as one needs to analyze the specific protections guaranteed to faculty in a contract to ensure that academic freedom is preserved, a college or university must attend to the cultural interpretations given to communication to achieve effective governance. To ignore these interpretations permits an incomplete understanding of academic governance.

**Communicative Symbols and Ceremonies.** Manifest messages of governance and the latent and symbolic cultural meanings of an institution also merit attention. As Feldman and March observed, "Organizational structures and processes often have symbolic importance to participants" (Birnbaum, 1989, p. 428). The composition of faculty senates and university committees, the absence or presence of the president at a meeting, and the participation or absence of the provost in promotion and tenure meetings all send messages to the community about governance. These messages are highly unstable and vary from campus to campus. They change over time and exemplify the latent and shifting cultural meanings created within academic communities.

Active faculty participation in governance might indicate to the academic world that a college or university is in the postsecondary mainstream. A for-profit college that relies entirely on part-time faculty who utilize distance learning may seek to legitimize itself by creating a virtual academic senate to prove that it is not so different from traditional institutions. The addition of a promotion and tenure committee that includes requirements about the need to do research at an institution that has no history of doing research may signify that the university aims to rise in the traditional academic hierarchy. Statements about academic freedom that refer to the American Association of University Professors (1966) place an institution in line with mainstream ideas about the topic. Conversely, a statement that stipulates a narrow interpretation of academic freedom made by a representative of a religious institution may be a purposeful symbolic message that the college or university has made a conscious decision to distance itself from the mainstream.

It is important to recognize that symbols and ceremonies, as interpretive acts, rarely have a singular meaning. A president's absence from senate meetings may indicate that the president's schedule is too full, but senators may interpret this absence as an affront to shared governance. The faculty's

extended deliberations over a move to dismiss a colleague accused of terrorist acts may appear to external constituencies as foot-dragging, whereas the faculty may perceive it to be evidence of their devotion to due process and academic freedom. A faculty committee that votes to move from an all-faculty assembly to a smaller group of elected representatives may be motivated by trying to increase faculty voice. However, others might see the change as an attempt to stifle faculty voice. Attending to the symbolic side of academic life is necessary to improve governance. Therefore, those who seek to rethink how governance functions at their institution need to take into account the specific symbolic and cultural meanings that infuse an organization's structures.

Perceptions of governance on a campus are determined in part by the ceremonies and culture that exist within those organizational structures. Ceremonies are important sites for the analysis of the values of an academic community. At some institutions, for example, during convocation, a faculty member, perhaps the president of the senate, will lead the procession of faculty, administrators, and graduates in the ceremony. The message of this action is that the faculty "lead" the institution. Similarly, when faculty recommend candidates for an honorary doctorate to a board of trustees, they simultaneously highlight their ceremonial and "real" roles in shared governance. Ceremonies provide individuals with a sense of membership and integration in an organization. They convey to faculty that they are not simply members of a guild, rather that they play a central role in determining the institution's well-being and future. An organization deprived of ceremonies that celebrate or dramatize organizational values is one in which little explicit attention is paid to the cultural aspects of academic life. A de-ritualized organization is one bereft of meaning. In such cases, the actors have assumed that the institution is a collection of instrumentalities in which decisions are made through chains of command. While one cannot dispute the benefits of effective and efficient procedures for an institution, if one ignores the cultural aspects of organizational life, one runs the risk of overlooking the invisible bonds of communal affiliation that tie the professorate to their institution and to one another.

### **Improving Communication and Governance**

For those who subscribe to a cultural view of the academic world and are concerned about enhancing faculty involvement in governance, there are at least two central suggestions that logically follow the arguments raised here.

**Focus on Communicative Pathways.** David Leslie has argued cogently (1996) that "change in colleges and universities comes when it happens in the trenches; what faculty and students do is what the institution becomes. It does not happen because a committee or a president asserts a new idea" (p. 110). Unfortunately, there is often a temptation to revert to old-fashioned notions of power, so "where the buck stops" indicates who



has the final authority. If the buck does not pass by the faculty or if individuals believe that the buck actually stops at the faculty's doorstep, then governance does not appear to be shared. From a cultural perspective, however, governance needs to be more than a basic check of who gets to vote and who is denied the opportunity to do so.

Shared governance does not result solely from the formal allocation of spheres of responsibility and authority (Trow, 1990). Instead, informal arrangements and processes should be interpreted by the academic collective with regard to the relative influence of different academic bodies and the significance of different decisions. It is important to recognize that faculty involvement in governance occurs on many levels and in many forums. Simply because faculty do not vote on a preponderance of issues does not mean that shared governance is not functioning. Meaningful involvement is achieved when multiple constituencies are able to communicate with one another across multiple venues.

Colleges and universities exist in "loosely coupled" environments (Weick, 1976, p. 3). A mistaken tendency among those attempting to improve faculty governance is to try to tighten this loose coupling. Far too often individuals assume that for meaningful engagement to occur all decisions must be processed through a governance structure such as a senate. Such a mindset creates the potential for faculty governance to deal with just a few issues over the course of a year. Instead, those involved would be better advised to accept that institutions exist in decentralized organizations and that the faculty's engagement with an issue may be sporadic. Effective governance, then, is defined not so much by the presence of an efficient structure or by the number of votes the faculty concludes in a year. Effective governance pertains more to the understanding and management of meaning such that the core values of the faculty and of the institution are not merely preserved, but advanced.

**Accept the Potency of Speech and Literacy Events.** Those who understand the symbolic functions of speech and literacy events within an organization are more likely to use these communicative vehicles than those who ignore them. At a time when faculty have numerous communicative outlets at their disposal, it is imperative that they use them in a systematic fashion. As analysis of typical speech and literacy events at colleges or universities demonstrates, too often it appears as if the administration owns the airwaves. The alumni office puts out the university magazine. The president's office issues quarterly newsletters. The provost's office publishes a weekly news magazine and has periodic e-updates to advertise a particular idea. The provost currently is engaged in writing a strategic plan and has sent drafts to the entire faculty asking for feedback. The office of information services reports to the vice president for administration and manages the university's Web site. The deans send out weekly bulletins on listservs for their individual schools and send out a biannual update to donors, alumni, students, and faculty regarding the state of the school.



Meanwhile, the faculty senate tries to publish one or two newsletters a year that arrive three months late. Their Web site seldom is updated, so one is never really sure what topics are being addressed. The faculty have created a campuswide listserv, but after a heated debate about whether faculty messages should be edited or simply published, only two kinds of messages have appeared: occasional announcements about sublets from faculty who are about to depart on sabbatical, and messages from three professors who do not hesitate to use the listserv to expound on their most recent complaint. As a result, a third of the faculty also has removed itself from the listserv.

Such a portrait may seem like a caricature of academic life, but unfortunately, this scenario often closely reflects the reality of the situation. Some will respond that the administration naturally does a better job of communicating with the academic community, as they have both resources and time at their disposal. At the same time, some leaders are better at symbolic management than others. Faculty who are concerned about governance need to consider ways to communicate a message in a timely, concerted, and systematic manner. Yet, in an era when technology has increased our capability to communicate, faculty communication with one another and with university administration seems to have only decreased. Administrators have mastered ways to get their message out. In contrast, faculty often do not seem to recognize the importance of communication, which returns us to the central precept of this chapter.

Communication is not a cure-all for the current woes that confront those involved in shared governance, but a concern for organizational reform must be balanced with an awareness of the communicative codes within the workplace. Academic organizations are rich in cultural meanings. Intellectual work, in part, involves the understanding, decoding, and manipulation of symbolic messages. If faculty follow such methods in their intellectual endeavors, they can use a similar, critical approach in their efforts to improve shared governance within their academic communities.

## References

- American Association of University Professors. "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities." Washington, D.C.: American Association of University Professors, 1966. [<http://www.aaup.org/statements/Redbook/Govern.htm>].
- Clark, B. *The Distinctive College: Antioch, Reed, and Swarthmore*. Chicago: Aldine, 1970.
- Heath, S. "Protean Shapes in Literacy Events." In D. Tanned (ed.), *Spoken and Written Language*. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1982.
- Hymes, D. "Ways of Speaking." In R. Bauman and J. Sherzer (eds.), *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974.
- Leslie, D. "Strategic Governance: The Wrong Questions?" *Review of Higher Education*, 1996, 20(1), 101–112.
- Mayhew, L. B. "Administration and Governance of the University." Unpublished manuscript, 1974.
- Tierney, W. G., and Minor, J. T. "Challenges for Governance: A National Report." Los Angeles: Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, University of Southern California, 2003.

- Trow, M. "The Academic Senate as a School for University Leadership." *Liberal Education*, 1990, 76(1), 23–27.
- Weick, K. E. "Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1976, 21(1), 1–19.

*WILLIAM G. TIERNEY is Wilbur-Kieffer Professor of Higher Education and director of the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis at the Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California.*

*JAMES T. MINOR is an assistant professor of higher education in the HALE Program at Michigan State University.*