# Process as myth: understanding the mythic core of organisational process with ideal types

George Macgregor
*University of Strathclyde*

09 May 2012

I recently blogged about the publication of the latest PiP evaluation strand report (WP7:39 Evaluation of impact on business processes) and provided some additional comment on the more intriguing and esoteric observations that can be made about some of the report's findings. This is the second of the two posts I promised to make, and this time the intriguing observation relates to *organisational myth*.

As we noted yesterday, the WP7:39 strand of the evaluation evidenced C-CAP's impact on the business process as being a largely positive one. The evaluation adopted a mixed approach, making use of a series of qualitative and quantitative methods. Two of these approaches (qualitative benchmarking and Pareto analysis) were discussed in the previous blog post. But one of the additional theoretical techniques used was that of "structural metrics". Together these approaches enabled a comparative evaluation of the curriculum approval process under the "new state" (i.e. using C-CAP) and under the "previous state".

Structural metrics – as proposed by Balasubramanian and Gupta - provide a formal yet flexible technique to evaluate the implications of process change on process performance. They propose a list of structural metrics that can be easily deployed to create a formal approach to business process change evaluation. Balasubramanian and Gupta's metrics synthesise, build upon and extend the work of others. Many of their metrics are applicable to the HE sector and to the curriculum approval process, and have been cited in the literature by many researchers as being useful for assessing impact. The decision to use such a theoretical technique was an attempt to further quantify the improvements effected by C-CAP in process performance. To enable structural metric analysis, the curriculum approval process for courses and classes under the "previous state" was formalised using ISO 5807:1985 compliant symbology. The flow charts were then used to inform calculations of the structural metrics (as compared to the "new state"); although it was acknowledged that these charts only provided an "ideal type", in a Weberian sense, with some sub-processes remaining un-modelled.

An "ideal type" is a conceptual tool devised by – and borrowed from – Max Weber, perhaps one of the most influential and celebrated social scientists of all time (pictured). An ideal type is a conceptual tool introduced by Weber to approach and understand a chaotic reality. In essence, ideal types are an attempt to identify (or "model") what is essential about a phenomenon rather than simply replicating the confusing reality often associated with pure empiricism. An ideal type is therefore not intended to model certainty, or model phenomena perfectly; instead it stresses elements that are essential or define phenomena, and by doing so aids understanding of the phenomena under study. The ideal type became the foundation for some of Weber's most celebrated works (e.g. Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism) and has since become a standard conceptual tool in comparative analyses, particularly in the social sciences.
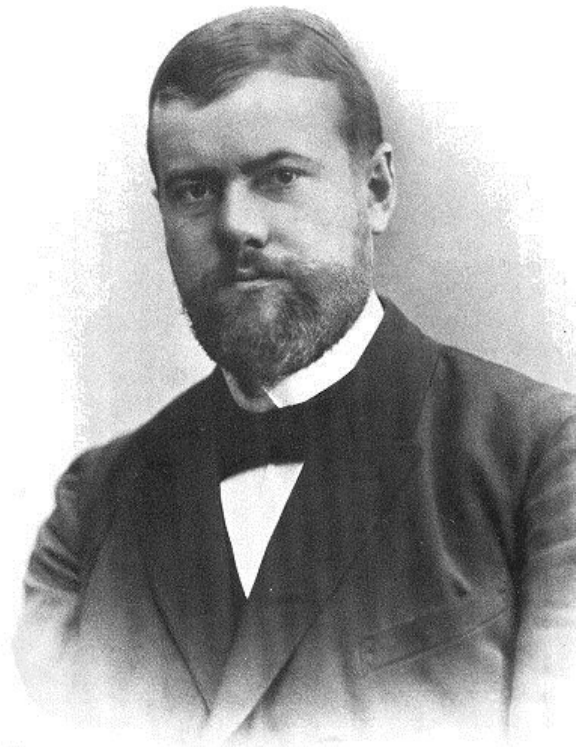
But why were ideal types required in a process change evaluation? The charts forming the basis of structural analysis form an ideal type because requirements analysis and stakeholder engagement throughout the lifetime of the PiP project has failed to generate a watertight model of the approval process to which all stakeholders will subscribe. The reasons for this are complex but appear to be a consequence of widespread misunderstanding about how the process really functions. This situation is further compounded by stakeholder specific perceptions of how the approval process operates, and myths about organisational procedures, as well as myths surrounding stakeholders' role within certain procedures, some of which are themselves mythic. Even at this late stage in the PiP project it remains not uncommon to encounter stakeholder $X$, who confidently states than their role in the process is to pass information to stakeholder $Y$ for processing. Stakeholder $Y$, when questioned, reports that the information stakeholder $X$ communicates is unnecessary and is not required for them to discharge their function; yet stakeholder $X$ remains adamant that it is within their role to behave in this way and by doing so they are adhering to the "process". In effect, a variety of myths surrounding the approval process have emerged over many years at the University of Strathclyde. These myths have become pervasiveness and are subscribed to by many actors, thus subverting the process as it currently exists and undermining attempts to formalise or model the true process, let alone effect process change.

To understand this adherence to myth we have to look to the research of organisational theorists and behaviourists. Myths are not uncommon in organisational contexts and, appropriately enough, Weber was one of the first to note their existence in his study of bureaucracies. Myths are considered important and are often considered necessary in functioning bureaucracies. Seminal work undertaken by scholars in the area of organisational behaviour explores the formation of myth and ceremony in "institutionalised organisations". They note the importance of institutional myths in helping employees interpret organisational culture, or their use in explaining "how things are done around here". Myths become, in effect, a factual and highly objective reality for organisational members in which the myth is constructed to demonstrate why particular practices and procedures are the "only way" an organisation can function effectively.

But the same scholars also note that such myths are frequently contrary to the needs of an organisation; organisations are invariably attempting to grapple with the efficient and effective achievement of organisational goals or activities. Myths can therefore decrease the coordination and control demanded

by genuine organisational activities and instead replaces them with a "logic of confidence and good faith". This is further interpreted by other leading scholars whose work finds organisational myth to be a "double-edged sword": essential to employees' organisational culture, enabling them to attach meaning and subsequent validity to the disparate activities and processes occurring at the organisation; but also a source of resistance and an impediment to system wide change, because over time the myth becomes the accepted way of explaining or understanding "organisational occurrences in the midst of ambiguity or uncertainty". Although powerful myths promulgated from the management may inspire and motivate organisational members to abandon their myths in pursuit of new organisational goals, such new myths may also be shunned if they misalign with the existing myth. Existing myths that misalign with an organisational ethos, or are disjoint with the ultimate objectives of an organisation, inhibit day-to-day organisational operations and impede progress since they become a source of resistance to change. The highest chance of successful organisational change is therefore likely to be during the latter stages of the "myth lifecycle", during which the validity of the myth will be questioned by some (new) organisational members owing to the myth's various anomalies. Better understanding when organisational interventions are most likely to succeed has consequently formed the basis of "myth analysis" research, first emerging in the early 1980s as a sub-strand of organisational research.

The ideal type approach to modelling the approval process was therefore considered an appropriate way - and perhaps the only way - of capturing the most significant process milestones, activities and transactions. And it is worth noting that structural metric analysis yielded perhaps the most positive quantitative data on C-CAP's impact on business process, providing numerous positive figures and evidencing a huge improvement on the extant process. Through structural metric analysis C-CAP demonstrated potential for improving approval process cycle time, process reliability, process visibility, process automation, process parallelism and reductions in transition delays, thus contributing to considerable process efficiencies. Analysis also identified several stages or activities in the process that require fundamental adjustment in order to improve overall process performance. A more general but related limitation to such theoretical approaches is the difficulty in accurately modelling business process in an "institutionalised organisation" where organisational myth, process misunderstanding and process subversion are pervasive. Any analysis dependent upon the use of generalised ideal types will not yield the most precise results or accurately reflect "process reality". The results from this section of the evaluation, though promising and an indication of the overall process impact of C-CAP, are therefore not entirely generalizable and - like the philosophical and material findings highlighted in the previous blog post - should be considered alongside data from the other sources.

One promising note on which to conclude is that the success of C-CAP piloting and the positive evidence from evaluation activity is highlighting some of the more anomalous aspects of prevailing organisational myths. Perhaps the current myth lifecycle is nearing an end and change is nigh?