Exploring the Social Dynamics of Intellectual Reform: An Institutional Perspective

Mazen Hashem

Abstract

This work aims at constructing a theory of intellectual reform that accounts for cultural and structural factors, and the way they interact. Taking a dynamic approach, this paper focuses on the processes of reform and how each process has bearing on and is contingent upon other processes.

Key factors of intellectual reform are identified, which include sophistication of vision, intellectual vitality, perspective elaboration, diffusion into educational institutions, and literal versatility. In addition, they include institutional autonomy, organizational capacity, and financial resources. The paper identifies the internal dynamics within each of these factors, then shows how these dynamics interact with each other. The paper concludes with an application of the model to the Islamization of Knowledge effort, pointing to critical factors and bottlenecks that affected its course of development.

Introduction

"At the dawn of every century Allah sends that who reforms and renew the message of Islam" is a hadith that is frequently heard from Friday pulpits to political rallies. The hadith is cited, and the interpretation of what it is meant by "tajdid" covers all terrain. By large, the Muslim mentality views tajdid as an act of a gifted, God-conscious person; some ulama even went into the trouble to name who was the mujadid (reformer) of each century in the Islamic history. Academics have a different take on reform. Studies on the history of ideas trace the lines of ideational heredity: who influenced whom and to what degree, frequently engaging in some levels of reification where ideas travel, flow, and get stuck. Psychology is more interested in the personal qualities of achieving intellectuals and tires to estimate their IQ, figure out the internal tensions that drove them, or to point out to their sibling-order and its impact on their intellectual egoism. Sociology often speaks of the organizational determinants of intellectual reform in which ideas were cooked and interests were reconciled.

The purpose of this paper is to present a model that defines the salient dynamics of intellectual reform and to analyze their interactions. It tries to integrate structural and cultural factors that are relevant to the subject and show how they form a web of complex influences, none of which, alone, can deliver the hoped-for outcome. The paper concludes with illustrative applications, mapping the Islamization of knowledge reform efforts in the light of the suggested model and comparing it to feminism.

But before I proceed, it might be prudent to anticipate the reactions to this type of a paper: the empiricist sees no hard data; the historian cries the absence of case details; and postmodern sensibilities get offended by its positivistic tone. Not withholding these criticisms, I still hold that the paper points to some invariant processes which their comprehension is valuable, and that, despite all of its abstraction, the paper does have policy implications.

The format of the presentation will be as follows: I will be speaking of five major *dynamics* of intellectual reform, elaborating on the constituting elements of each (see Table 1.). Then I will show how these dynamics interact among themselves in a complex way. In this fashion, I will be arguing that intellectual reform does not hinge on individual capacities alone,

but foremost is contingent upon the interactions of structural and cultural factors of the research setting and of the societal context.

Elements and Dynamics of Intellectual Reform

Cultural Dynamics

Sophistication of Vision

Intellectual reform does not simply spring out of the accumulation of research in normal science, but it emerges gradually after crystallizing a vision. 'Sophistication of vision' is one major factor in intellectual reform and is defined by four dynamics: seeking interdisciplinarianism, multilinguisticality, historical depth, and universalism. First, for the vision to be sophisticated, it has to tap into the ideational resources of more than one discipline. *Seeking interdisciplinarianism* cannot be attained by simply stacking-up "information" from other fields. Rather it is the intersecting of perspectives that yield a newly formulated vision that is not reducible to any of its individual parts. Thus, it is helpful to differentiate between vertical depth and horizontal breadth of interdisciplinarianism. Vertical depth in the form of intensive knowledge in the details of a discipline is not as crucial, because what is sought is different approaches to empirical observations, not their content. On the other hand, horizontal breadth of interdisciplinarism is of most significance since each different discipline brings its own unique angle that adds versatility to the vision. In other words, interdisciplinarianism maintains a degree of paradigmatic fluidity within a perspective; it prevents from becoming encapsulated within one prevailing paradigm, though it operates within clear generative codes that continually reconstruct the overall boundaries of a perspective or a meta-paradigm. In this way, multi-paradigmaticity is sought but it is centripetally directed, which illuminate the perspective instead of fracturing it.

Second is *seeking historical depth*. The sophistication of a reform vision will be severely undercut when it gets overwhelmed by temporality. Narrowing down the time space enlarges temporal changes and turbulence and gives rise to 'fireworks innovation.' Research institutions are not immune to such type of *bida'*, and following fashionable trends, unfortunately, could be documented for both the social and physical

sciences. Conversely, historical depth allows for studying and appreciating long-term trajectories and outcomes, shielding the vision from falling into the trap of localism—temporal or geographic. However, history has a gravity of its own which can arrest the intellectual movement; and the richer the historical record is the more it has arresting potential. History, valuable as it is, can lure innovative thinking to solve the problems of the pasts with the tools of today, and to stay within the boundaries that have already been drawn and sanctified.

Table1. Dynamics of major factors of intellectual reform

Sophistication of Vision	*Perspective Elaboration*	*Intellectual Vitality*	*Institutional Autonomy*	*Organizational Capacity*
Seeking interdisciplinarianism	Synthesis mapping	Fostering stimuli and challenge	Embedded-insulation	Intuitive coordination
Seeking historical depth	Micro-macro integration	Linked-segmentation	Cohesive nesting	Blocking goal displacement
Seeking multi-linguisticality	Taping historical symbology	Resisting over-extension	Splintering containment	Resource renewal
Seeking universalism			Molding public relations	Refined recruitment

The third constituting dynamic is *seeking multi-linguisticality*. The sophistication of a reformative vision will be partially contingent on the linguistic multiplicity availed in the research unit. That is not to say that a research unit has to have the capability of translating world resources and becoming aware of contemporary innovations and competing trends, although that, to some degree, is needed. The multiplicity of linguistics refers for most to the potential insight in the deep structures of languages and the ability to connect language expressions (of ideas) to their philosophical roots.

Add note on Muslim languages (Arabic, Farsi, and Urdu) in the innovation understanding of Muslim ideational heritage, vs. Latin languages for understanding the western ideational heritage.

The fourth and last element of sophistication of vision is *universalism*, and is the most crucial. The three foregoing elements, seeking interdisciplinarianism, multi-linguisticality, and historical depth do not guarantee the emergence of a credible sophisticated vision, though it assures its potency. A vision would gain strength from

the three noted priorities, but it still can fall into centerism; universalism constitutes the moral force of a vision.

Perspective Elaboration

'Elaboration of perspective' is the second major factor behind intellectual reform, and it embodies three elements. One is *synthesis-mapping*. That is, intellectual innovation could present itself as a radical force that discards what it faces without giving answers. To be sure, such innovation might get the attention, but it is of a short life span. After all, some perennial questions come to the fore of any intellectual project, and any new thought or system of ideas has to furnish answers to such questions. However, to be able to answer perennial questions, a degree a synthesis is incumbent since many answers have already been given. The capability of absorbing those answers into own scheme and transforming them to become indigenous elements undercut claims of incompleteness or deficiency. In other words, the elaboration of a perspective requires the bringing in of diverse partial validity claims and accommodating them.

The second element that enables the process of elaboration is *micro-macro integration*. Responding to individual micro issues generates new questions for every answer to a micro issue, leaving in the end many unanswered questions. Similarly, tackling macro issues alone limits the potential of even delayed applicability (and not immediate applicability which should not be of concern). Only perspectives that succeed in integrating micro dimensions to macro wombs can be successfully nurtured. Failing to do such integration locks the innovative macro in its world, leaving it majestic but infertile.

Lastly, *taping historical symbology* is necessary for the elaboration of a perspective. This element is of great concern because it is a double-sword dilemma. Without a historical texture, thought looks frivolous and sound flimsy. If ideas to acquire high validity, they must reflect the wisdom, not of contemporary time, but the wisdom of humanity. However, arousing historical sensibilities without becoming imprisoned in a one cultural experience is a huge challenge. Another challenge is that

restoring historical symbols usually enliven associated meanings not all of which are sought. The efforts of intellectual reform then might get diverted into an activity of fossil restoration instead of elaboration.

Intellectual Vitality

Intellectual vitality is the third main factor behind intellectual reform and is constituted of three internal dynamics: fostering stimuli and challenge, linked-segmentation, and resisting over-extension. First, continual *fostering stimuli and challenge* is necessary because of the very fact that intellectual vitality is the outcome of humans. The process of intellectual production is overwhelming; unlike mainstreamed research, it does not have a roadmap to follow or a set of procedures to execute. In intellectual reform the person faces the formidable problem all at once, almost indivisible with no obvious beginning points; any lead point seems to be highly linked to a complex web of points, that makes the task daunting. *Fostering stimuli* generates strength and rekindles interest, without which intellectual efforts turn gradually into bookishism. *Fostering challenge*, on the other hand, infuses with a sense of duty. Indeed, to augment intellectual vitality, challenge has to be sought and fostered (see 'organizational capacity' below), and not just waited; it is a dynamic process and not a stationary feature.

It is for these reasons, probably, why important innovations usually emerge at a time of turbulence or a deep sense of a crisis. However, not all crises are fertile ground for innovation. Crises that set into motion chaos and bring order to the brink of collapse might not be conducive to innovation at all. To the contrary, crises in stable systems sharpen the faculty, motivate toward innovation, and infuse with a sense of responsibility.

The second element of 'intellectual vitality' is *linked-segmentation*. If there is something challenging about intellectual reform is the magnitude of ideas that it has to digest. Segmentation is just a factual necessity. However, what is more interesting is that the scheme of segmentation is itself an intellectual innovation. That is, segmentation determines priorities and implies a set of relations among the constituent

ideas in the intellectual space, all of which become taken-for-granted paradigmatic scheme. *Linked-segmentation* is that which succeeds in keeping the constituent parts connected to the totality and enmeshed within it, and it calls for defining the interfaces that allows for integration. It is this quality that sets apart holistic innovation from eccentric one, and it is this quality that orients thinkers, as human agents active in the process, to one of the two modes. Finally, *linked-segmentation* fulfills the known principle of graduality. Here I am tempted to say that linked-segmentation is one pronounced difference between prophethood and ordinary intellectual reform; of course, what makes prophethood stands-out is its connection to what is beyond this world.

The third dynamic of 'intellectual vitality' is *resisting over-extension*. This is the balancing force of what have been discussed under 'sophistication of vision' and 'perspective elaboration.' The discussion under those two headings highlights the immensity of the task of innovation—if we can called a "task" in the first place. Intellectual reform has to have such sweeping qualities of interdisciplinarianism and universalism, etc. These required qualities, by their very nature, push the process of innovation to pursue infinite horizons, at which the process halts. The line between being holistic and over-extension is fine. Over-extension is trying to tackle at once, all fronts simultaneously. Holism on the other hand (the dynamics of 'sophistication of vision' and 'perspective elaboration') embraces all fronts and dimension without blinking, but does not work on them at each wink.

Lastly, intellectual vitality is, of course, affected by more mundane conditions. Those are discussed under organizational capacity and constitute "interaction effects" in the logic of this paper.

Structural Dynamics

The three major dynamics discussed so far can be classified as cultural or ideational dynamics, although I showed that they embody elements that are both cultural and structural. Now I turn to a set of pure (is it?) structural dynamic.

Institutional Autonomy

'Institutional autonomy' embodies four dynamics: embedded insulation, cohesive nesting, splintering containment, and managing public relations. A note is due here. The differentiation between structural and cultural factors is not always easy, and sometimes should be avoided. It is exactly because there is a tendency to treat organizations as deed rational structures that I have defined *institutions* as a separate factor.

The first dynamic is *embedded-insulation*. Institutional autonomy can develop into isolation; embeddedness ensures interconnectedness without being overbearing. Such tempered insulation takes place at a variety of fronts. One front is the political front where the priorities of intellectual production might be at odds with that of the polity. Tempered insulation from public policy issues is another delicate area since organizations cannot totally ignore public concerns, but also cannot uncritically respond to them.

Both polity and activist groups look for ready application that address their immediate problems; they naturally look to intellectual and research organizations for help. Few can appreciate the theory-policy dilemma, the gap between them, and what does it take to operationalize a perspective and make it work in the real world. Overbearing demands from groups yearning for applicable models can push intellectual efforts to suggest what they often do the worst—the detailed plans as opposed to a vision and a strategy. Frustration soon fires-back on research organizations, interestingly, blaming the sound basis more than the bad mechanisms of application. On the other hand, demand from activists, polity, or else can function as a healthy stimulus if the organization is situated at a protective distance. Such distance allows hearing the voices without distortion, allows for a sympathetic understanding of the problematic, but at the same time allows for the freedom of contemplating unconventional solutions, or approaches to solutions, without the pressure of time. More specifically, the appropriate distance is that which allows intellectual organizations to suggest only approaches to problems, while keeping offering solutions

an option. That is, frequently intellectual organizations are usually called when the situation at hand is at a very deteriorating stage, and where there could be no ready solution. Furthermore, successful solutions usually emerge out of the indigenous environment; setting the local efforts on the right track is more crucial than handing out a "ready-made" solution.

The second dynamic of 'institutional autonomy' is *cohesive nesting*. Intellectual organizations thrive on lifelong committed workers; an organization cannot employ a person to innovate on part-time basis, paying him by the hour, and hoping that he/she will understand budgetary constraints. Intellectual workers, as human beings, bring with them to the organization expectations and ambitions, specific experiences and certain frustrations; some of them may have families, and all of them have their own personal networks. Engaging such a person in his/her totality needs careful nesting. One dilemma of recruitment is keeping the balance between endogamous recruitment that is conducive to better nesting but is less likely to bring new insights, and exogamous recruitment that taps a prospective intellectual mine at the risk of disturbing the quite existing nest.

The third internal dynamic in 'institutional autonomy' is *splintering containment*. Intellectual organizations are notoriously passionate. Other kinds of organizations might fight over money, advantages, and the like, but rarely do they fight over principles and ideas; intellectual organizations do. It is crucial to note that innovative people, by definition, are very engaged with what they do. They disagree on ideas and principles because of the very fact that they are people of ideas and principles who cannot stand as spectators. If such people work in an environment of an established paradigm, disputes are less likely to occur than in an average organization; after-all, intellectuals are typically cosmopolitan and tolerant. However, if we are talking about a reformative organization where there is continuous paradigm-shifting and paradigm-nesting, then compassionate disagreements are the trade of the operation. Containing such structural tendencies to splintering is a dilemma that faces intellectual organizations.

How to deal with such tendency requires delicate balancing along the lines of age, seniority, status, and rewards.

However, continual *splintering containment* could drain motivation to innovation. "Letting go" might be an acceptable choice and an impetus for innovation in itself. When the dispute relates to the vision itself, it might be wiser to split; there is no point to keep an intellectual organization together if significant ideational divergence occurred. If dispute relates to tactics, the chance of reconciliation is ample. However, even continual disputes over tactics could drive the organization to become totally unproductive. Prolonging the life of such an organization might forge a new identity that is centered around perpetual expounding on the differences instead of developing a shared vision. In sum, *splintering containment* should operate on peripheral issues only.

The last dynamic of 'institutional autonomy' is *molding public relations*. Organizations do not live in a vacuum; they are part of the social fabric, and that what grants them the term "institutions." Modern organizations, since the rise of views that emphasize the human factor, tend to opt for a hypocritical accommodation of demands. Public relations is seen then as another rational mechanism to absorb or abate public demands, not as much a moral commitment to their needs and concerns. Intellectual organizations can play this game, but how truly reformative their output would be. Market-minded public-relations is a subtle force that creeps into the policies and organizational priorities of organizations. Even it could influence research design as well as workers' intentions, all of which take-away from the moral depth of a reformative organization and from its credibility. The successful organization is that which succeed in molding public relations in its own image, staying both consistent with its mission and honest with the public, regardless that such tailored course will not satisfy all people and entities.

Organizational Capacity

We can detect four active dynamics in any organizing body of an intellectual project: intuitive coordination, blocking goal displacement, resource renewal, and

refined recruitment. First is *intuitive coordination.* Coordinating the efforts of workers in an organization is a well-known major function of management. However, the management of educational, scientific, and charitable organizations frequently fails to achieve such a crucial function of coordination. The divide between line (administration) and staff (professionals) is most pronounced in such types of organizations. *Intuitive coordination* is the dynamic in which management patiently engages itself in the very nature of the innovative work conducted (research, for example) and does not treat it as a commodity subject to business logic. Coordination then takes a different meaning than moving units along an assembly line, watching the chain of command, or keeping timesheets of workers. *Intuitive coordination* pays attention to the very elements discussed in the previous section. That is, it pays attention to *fostering stimuli* and *challenge*, to *seeking interdisciplinarianism*, etc., by furnishing the organizational environment that strengthens such dynamic, and by pursuing contacts that serve such functions.

The second internal dynamic is *blocking goal displacement*. There are two pressures that drive the administration of a research organization and the like to go astray from professed goals: (1) the pressure to muster financial resources that rarely appreciate intellectual activities, and (2) the pressure of 'status deprivation' which gears management to expand its administrational power. Avoiding those traps is easily preached than done, for the administrative staff in nonprofit organizations occupies an awkward position. That is, the focus on pursuing monetary profits in a for-profit business organization creates an equalizing ground for all contestants—all pursue gains but through different specializations, and pursuing gains is not looked-upon down. However, in a research organization, the basis of status is heavily tilted toward the intellectual stars; even their position is morally imbued. Such dynamics push toward one of two stationary but skewed points: one is where the managerial and administrative efforts become invisible despite their indispensable services. The second is a reversed situation where management succeeds in commodifying intellectual production and monopolizing its rewards, leaving intellectual labor in obscurity, except

for a prominent figure who cannot be overshadowed. This stationary point usually occurs when the division between line and staff is very pronounced, which becomes a source intellectual labor burnout.

A third internal dynamic is *resource renewal*. Commercial and industrial goods have the natural capacity of giving the impression that they are qualitatively changing: safer, more efficient, easier to use, etc. Intellectual products do not have such colorful appeal; the question of how to keep interest alive becomes paramount. Allocating funds between the pure academic activities and public relations is always a delicate issue. Typically, reformative organizations find themselves pursuing new beneficiaries after the "enthusiasm phase" of some of the old supporters has faded. What is important is that such change does not come without a price, since new expectations enter the formula and necessitate adjustment. Interestingly, mainstream research organizations, as opposed to innovative ones, are probably less susceptible to such pressures for the very fact that their product is more visible and, to some extent, predefined.

The last internal dynamic in 'organizational capacity' is the *refined recruitment.* Intellectual organizations are notoriously eccentric and have their unique identities and localized atmosphere. In such a setting, the organization cannot easily plug a new employee and expect her to innovate. Handpicking recruits and evaluating them globally, and not simply on formal achievements, approximates an art. The "law of the small number" is very evident here. That is, the size of the productive groups typically ranges from 5 to a ceiling of 12 or so. This "law" not a rigid, however, historical experience points to its immanence. Units of a larger number usually split. Members of smaller units usually galvanize around a senior thinker who inspires the group, attracts new fellows, and draws the outlines of its framework. Notably, small groups succeed in shaping the focus of the group to tackle the complex problem at hand; in addition, they keep the scope of argumentation within limits. To the contrary, it is simply a near practical impossibility to achieve such required intense focus in large groups. Of course,

larger groups can achieve a state of focused attention, but that is attainable only in emotional issues and with the existence of a charismatic source.

Interaction among Dynamics

So far the discussion focused on four factors of intellectual reform and identified the internal dynamics of each (as listed in Table 1.). These internal dynamics underlie intellectual reform factors, forming a sub-grid. However, what were called factors in the above discussion are themselves dynamics and not static elements. Consequently, three levels of interactions take place in intellectual reform, none of which was discussed in the body of the paper. These interactions are depicted in Figure 1. and could be conceived as follows:

1. The internal dynamics cluster around functions setting up emergent properties—these emergent properties are the major "factors" that I have discussed. Now, these factors interact among themselves, as totalities, and interact with exogenous societal factors. This is the first-order interaction, not discussed in the paper, but depicted in Figure 1.

2. Some of the major factors interact with a constituent dynamic of another factor. This is a second-order interaction.

3. Some of the internal dynamics of different factors interact among themselves (across factors) creating a set of "linking" dynamics (not discussed in the paper). This is the third-order interaction.

For example, we can say that 'intellectual vitality' is an emergent dynamic that interacts with 'institutional autonomy', as a whole, and with some other societal forces such as available financial resources or the literal versatility of a society (see Figure 2.); this is the first-order interaction. We can also say that 'intellectual vitality' interacts with some of the constituent dynamics of 'institutional autonomy,' such as *embedded-insulation* and *splintering containment*; this is the second-order level of interaction. Finally, we can say that *fostering stimuli and challenge* interacts with *embedded-insulation*; this is the third-order interaction. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Three Levels of Interaction

First-order interaction

Intellectual vitality   *Institutional Autonomy*

Fostering stimuli & challenge   Embedded-insulation

Linked-segmentation   Splintering-containment

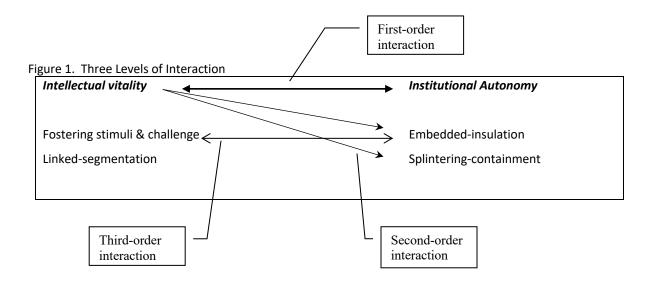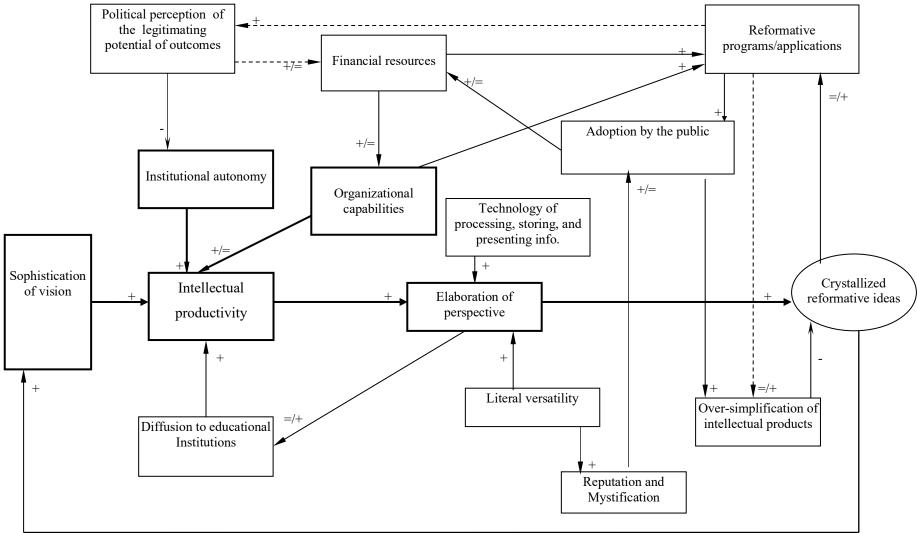Third-order interaction   Second-order interaction

Figure 2. below shows the first-order interactions and emphasizes their dynamic nature. In addition, it shows dynamics that affect the intellectual reform process but are not indigenous to it, such as the availability of financial resources or technological sophistication that can serve literary functions.

Interactions with the non-indigenous factors occur on the first-order of interaction. For example, the impact of the organizational capacity on intellectual vitality is denoted by an arrow with a plus followed by an equal sign (+/=). This translates that the organizational capacity contributes positively to intellectual vitality then it levels off. After a certain level, the effect of the organizational capacity seizes due to the academic nature of the enterprise and its centrality around the brains of human beings, unlike what we might observe in an industrial setting where the organizational effect shows more endurance.

Political perception of the legitimating potential of outcomes

Reformative programs/applications

Financial resources

+

+/=

Institutional autonomy

-

+/=

Organizational capabilities

Adoption by the public

+

Technology of processing, storing, and presenting info.

+/=

Sophistication of vision

+

Intellectual productivity

+/=

+

Elaboration of perspective

+

+

+

Crystallized reformative ideas

=/+

+

Diffusion to educational Institutions

=/+

Literal versatility

+

+

=/+

Over-simplification of intellectual products

-

Reputation and Mystification

+

Legend: Doted lines denote partial effect. An equal sign denotes a lag. Read all sings from left to right.

1

Application and Comparison

	Islamization of Knowledge	Feminism
Sophistication of Vision		
Interdisciplinarianism		Hi
Multi-linguisticality		Lo
Historical depth		Med
Universalism		Med

	Islamization of Knowledge	Feminism
Perspective Elaboration		
Synthesis mapping		Hi
Micro-macro integration		Lo
Taping historical symbology		Hi/Med

	Islamization of Knowledge	Feminism
Intellectual vitality		
Forstering stimuli and challenge		V. Hi
Linked-segmentation		Med
Resisting over-extension		Lo

First-Order Interactions

One is the 'organizational capability' of such institution that carries the efforts of reform. As any other human enterprise, people who work in such institutions needs support, from monetary remuneration on which they can survive, to services that facilitate their work. And if we accept the popular image of reformers as not being operationally perceptive, we can further more appreciate the crucial role of the organizational maturity of intellectual organization. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that intellectual reformers, as individuals, may not be any less operationally savvy than the average person, but the nature of their very work put them at a structural operational disadvantage, whether it is on the cognitive radius of focus, the social level of expectation, or the level of accumulated experience. Furthermore, probably the most important function of the organization is to coordinate the efforts of the mental workers in such an institution. Of course, I am here discounting lone individuals as reformers; such individuals might bring brilliant "flashes" of ideas, but their product do not amount for considerable output, nor is it conducive to systematic reform.