Published in Human Relations. Please cite as:
Jarzabkowski, P., J. Sillince & D. Shaw. 2010. 'Strategic ambiguity as a rhetorical resource for enabling multiple strategic goals'. *Human Relations,* 63.2: 219-248.

Strategic ambiguity as a rhetorical resource for enabling multiple interests

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Abstract. The literature on ambiguity reflects contradictory views on its value as a resource or a problem for organizational action. In this longitudinal empirical study of ambiguity about a strategic goal, we examined how strategic ambiguity is used as a discursive resource by different organizational constituents and how that is associated with collective action around the strategic goal. We found four rhetorical positions, each of which drew upon strategic ambiguity to construct the strategic goal differently according to whether the various constituents were asserting their own interests or accommodating wider organizational interests. However, we also found that the different constituents maintained these four rhetorical positions simultaneously over time, enabling them to shift between their own and other's interests rather than converging upon a common interest. These findings are used to develop a conceptual framework that explains how strategic ambiguity may serve as a resource for different organizational constituents to assert their own interests whilst also enabling collective organizational action, at least of a temporary nature.

Keywords: rhetoric; context; strategic ambiguity; collective action

A contextual feature of knowledge-intensive, professional organizations that presents particular problems for their management, leadership and strategy processes is the ambiguity that often attaches to professional and knowledge work. However, strategically, ambiguity may also be considered a resource that lends itself to the political nature of collective action. We apply rhetorical theory as a way of marrying these different views of ambiguity for two reasons. First, as ambiguity involves contested interpretations, in which different groups must be persuaded to act collectively, rhetoric provides a means of managing ambiguity. Second, evidence of the political purpose of ambiguity in managing collective action suggests that strategic ambiguity is an example of a rhetorical device. Our application of rhetorical theory in an empirical study of a business school contributes to our understanding of both ambiguity and also of rhetorical variation in enabling collective action despite multiple interests.

Ambiguous goals have multiple, indistinct, incoherent or fragmented meanings, in which no single meaning is the 'best' or most coherent interpretation (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003; Wallace and Hoyle, 2006). Ambiguous goals are typically associated with particular characteristics, such as multiple constituencies that place legitimate demands upon the organization (Davenport and Leitch, 2005; Denis, Langley, Rouleau, 2007; Middleton-Stone and Brush 1996; Wallace and Hoyle, 2006); an autonomous professional workforce that is antithetical to managerial values (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Denis, Langley, Cazale, 1996); diffuse power that constrains the exercise of senior management power (Cohen and March, 1986; Denis et al, 1996; 2001) and lack of direct control over resources (Middleton-Stone and Brush, 1996). These features of ambiguity are typically found in public sector, professional and knowledge-intensive organizations, such as hospitals (Denis, Lamothe, Langley, 2001), cultural industries (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2003; Oakes, Cooper, Townley, 1998), universities (Cohen and March, 1986; Jarzabkowski, 2005) and professional service firms (Fenton and Pettigrew, 2006; Lowendahl, 1997).

In such contexts, ambiguity has three dimensions; goal ambiguity, authority ambiguity and technology ambiguity (Cohen and March, 1986). Goal ambiguity arises from the plurality of interests and meanings that multiple constituents attribute to any given goal. As multiple goals compound, they generate conflicting priorities for constituents (Wallace and Hoyle, 2006). Authority ambiguity refers to the diffuse sources of power held by different constituents, which enables them to pursue at least partial solutions to their own interests without regard to hierarchical power. Hence, suppression of ambiguity through management fiat is not an option (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Denis et al, 1996; 2001). Technology ambiguity suggests that the relationship between goals and the means to achieve them is not clear. This may arise from indirect control over resources (Middleton-Stone and Brush, 1996) or unclear relationships between goals and their outcomes or performance indicators (Wallace and Hoyle, 2006).

Taken together, these dimensions of ambiguity are often presented as problematic for management. For example, leadership is challenged because of problems with authority ambiguity. Leadership constellations must remain aligned with political interests in the organization (Denis et al, 1996), engaging in micro-management to influence activity (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003), or developing distributed pockets of leadership that represent different interests within the organization (Fenton and Pettigrew, 2006). Similarly goal and technology ambiguity present problems for strategy processes. Organizations engage in largely symbolic planning processes that have little relationship to the activities of organizational members (Middleton-Stone and Brush, 1996), pursuing cyclical processes of change because of the need to gain political realignment in between changes (Denis et al, 1996; 2001), and adopting incremental approaches in order to balance the ongoing tensions arising from ambiguity throughout the change process (Vaara et al, 2003; Wallace and Hoyle, 2006). Ambiguity thus presents a problem for generating collective action. The achievement of sustainable agreement between actors in ambiguous contexts is difficult because of the often unstated and varying aims that the different actors bring to any action (Huxham and Vangen, 2000). Small wonder, then, that Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) portray ambiguity as an '*ugly*' aspect of organizations; '*high ambiguity is not remediable. It is difficult to fix it and transform it into something good because it is not known what to remedy*' (p.963). In this literature, ambiguity presents an ongoing, complex problem for organizations that are attempting to pursue collective action.

However, another vein of literature proposes that strategic ambiguity, defined as ambiguity in the communication of goals, may be a discursive resource in these contexts (Davenport and Leitch, 2005; Eisenberg, 1984; Ring and Perry, 1985). This viewpoint examines the discursively constructed, interpretative nature of goals, in which ambiguity enables different constituents to attribute different meanings to the same goal, or for powerful actors to construct different meanings for any given goal according to the interests of their audience (Eisenberg, 1984; Eisenberg and Goodall, 1997). For example, powerful actors may use the ambiguity of goals strategically in order to generate collective action, by encouraging constituents to sign up to a higher-order or more abstracted meaning that does not counteract their particular interests (Eisenberg and Goodall, 1997; Ring and Perry, 1985). Actors may have different interpretations of a situation but still agree on what action to take (Donnellon et al., 1986), particularly where the initial goals are expressed with sufficient ambiguity that all actors can subscribe to them (Davenport and Leitch, 2005). Robertson and Swan's (2003) study of a consultancy firm showed that ambiguity, while it requires self-interested members to argue persuasively for their own positions, can also work as a cultural norm for promoting self-discipline in such contexts. Such authors therefore propose that strategic ambiguity is a valuable political resource in ambiguous contexts because it enables the mobilization of collective action and change, even where organizational constituents hold different interests.

Ambiguity-prone contexts thus present a challenge to strategic action. On the one hand, ambiguity is a political resource that might help with generating action. However, ambiguity also enables partial and multiple meanings and interests to proliferate, which obscure action. Such contexts are thus prone to different solutions and meanings being attributed to an ambiguous situation by the different participants. These participants will engage with the ambiguity of a situation differently according to their different interests and meanings, leading to multiple ways of conceptualizing strategic action. However, much existing research is conducted from the perspective of one group of key actors who are trying to manage ambiguity (e.g. Denis et al, 1996; Jarzabkowski, 2008), rather than examining how multiple constituents respond to the ambiguity that they encounter and the implications of those responses for other constituents and for strategic actions.

In particular, the two strands of literature discussed above tend to take partial views on ambiguity, either as a source of resistance to managerial action by professional actors, or as a political resource for managerial actors. While authors in the second vein offer a more positive view of ambiguity, it is expressed in a somewhat normative, top-down way; strategic ambiguity can be an asset, where it is carefully managed as a discursive resource by skilled managers. While discursive construction of ambiguous goals can undoubtedly enable managers to influence their constituents (Davenport and Leitch, 2005; Vaara et al, 2004), it is important, given the processual problems of cyclical change, political realignment, control, leadership and manageability found in the first vein of literature (e.g. Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Denis et al, 1996; Wallace and Hoyle, 2006), to also ask how strategic ambiguity plays out amongst the relevant constituents over time, rather than for managers in the pursuit of a single initiative. However, there has been little examination of the way that professional and managerial actors might each deal with the ambiguity that they encounter or the implications of their different approaches to ambiguity for the organization as a whole. Our study therefore seeks to illuminate how ambiguity is used as a resource by different actors and whether this leads to engagement in collective action within ambiguous contexts.

Rhetoric and context

Ambiguous contexts, characterized by multiple constituents, diffuse power and diverse interests, are subject to intense efforts by actors to assert their point of view. As persuasion is important in such contexts, we propose that rhetoric, which is a branch of discourse and language theory associated with persuasion, is an appropriate theoretical and methodological lens for understanding ambiguity. We first explain the growing attention to rhetoric as a way of explaining how modern organizations cope with ambiguity. We then locate various organizational approaches within rhetorical theory and define our stance on rhetoric in this paper.

The organization studies literature increasingly demonstrates the importance of rhetoric in the micro processes of management and the macro processes of institutionalization (e.g., Cheney, et al, 2004; Fine, 1996; Golant and Sillince, 2007; Jarzabkowski and Sillince, 2007; Sillince, 2002, 2005; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Zbaracki, 1998). However, while the classical rhetorical tradition (e.g., Aristotle, 1984: 2295) and Western business codes (Scollon and Scollon, 2001) recommend that rhetoric should be clear, modern organizations are often characterised by ambiguity in terms of speaker, audience and message (Cohen and March, 1974; Eisenberg and Goodall, 1997). For example, rhetorical theory shows how actors draw flexibly on archetypal rhetorical strategies that are based in different institutional logics, in the process exploiting the ambiguities between logics (Eastman and

Bailey, 1998; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). For example, proponents and opponents of the multidisciplinary organizational form drew on the competing logics of expertise and trusteeship respectively (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). Institutional logics may become more ambiguous when they are appropriated rhetorically in this way (Boiral, 2003). Zbaracki (1998) noted a difference between the 'technical' practice of total quality management (TQM) that was adopted in his research sites and the appropriation of a *'rhetorical TQM…a broadly used, ambiguous term with unclear organizational implications*' (p.603). The ambiguity surrounding the rhetorical appropriation of TQM enabled actors to proclaim its success in one successful project by overlooking five failed projects. This ambiguity was later amplified by attributing meanings to the technical TQM that excluded its challenging, statistical content. Such uses of rhetoric exploit the ambiguity of modern organizations, in order to justify particular meanings (Fine, 1996; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001) and to socially construct particular courses of action as desirable (Jarzabkowski and Sillince, 2007; Zbaracki, 1998), without necessarily excluding other meanings and actions that may be drawn upon for other purposes (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). Classical rhetorical theory is thus challenged by the ambiguity of modern organizations, which do not have a single clear message, or a singular, identifiable speaker nor, often, any co-present audience (Cheney, 1992).

In order to understand these sources of ambiguity it is possible to use critical methods of uncovering an '*implied author'* (Booth, 1961: 176) and a hypothetical or '*implied audience'* (Bitzer, 1999). Whereas a single speaker, intentional speech acts and a co-present audience provide an appropriate context for persuasion, organizations and their environments are more complex and indefinite. If organizations are considered as ambiguous, then the role of rhetoric, as a process of persuasion, is to set up a sense of commonality and thus to induce identification with the organization and its goals, values and actions (Burke, 1989a). A rhetoric of identification overcomes people's feeling of separateness and isolation from one another, by exploiting their understanding of the ambiguity involved in co-existing human separateness and community; that is: '*joined and separate*' (Burke, 1989a: 21) requires a rhetoric that identifies with the audience's recognition of this endemic duality. Identification is a powerful explanation of how organizations legitimate their actions. Organizational actors use identification rhetoric ambiguously so that it can be interpreted by others in different ways that are beneficial for the source organization (Cheney, 1991). Western business codes emphasise essentialist notions of identity that assume 'one true meaning' for an organization (Eisenberg, 2007: 241). Yet the need for organizations to secure variable external legitimacy encourages the development of multiple and contingent organizational identities that contradict such essentialist notions, contradictions that are often managed by the use of ambiguous language (Cheney, 1991).

The rhetoric of identification is also powerful as a means of understanding how organization members behave. For example, Fine (1996: 94) has suggested that for top restaurant chefs, '*the question of what other occupations were similar to cooking – the analogizing of work - was essential*'; chefs identify with other, similar occupations. Because rhetoric constructs identification with the speaker, part of the process involves constructing the speaker's ethos. This is done self-consciously by means of identifying the self with a constructed audience: '*In practice, the cook's audience is often the self, demanding food to be 'as good as it can be'*' (Fine, 1996: 103). For example, accountants are encouraged to rhetorically construct themselves as able to exploit their private lives in order to develop business contacts (Covaleski et al., 1998; Grey, 1994). This rhetorical identification of the self with an assumed audience is an important part of how actors then act towards that audience. For example, Jarzabkowski and Sillince (2007) showed how university top managers' ability to position trade-offs between goals to their academic audience was shaped by the way that they constructed themselves in relation to that audience. This process of self-construction involves reciprocal affirmation in which construction of self-identity is validated by others through a process of experimentation, feedback, imitation (Ibarra, 1999) and collaboration in the interactive process (Alvesson, 2001; Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998: 173; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 142).

It is important to distinguish between organization studies that define rhetoric's role as persuasion of others (e.g. Green, 2004; Sillince, 2005; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005) and those that define rhetoric's role in terms of construction of self and identification (e.g. Alvesson, 2001; Fine, 1995; Jarzabkowski and Sillince, 2007). According to this second role of self construction, rhetoric is concerned with values. This is a central aspect of the 'new rhetoric' (Burke, 1989a; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969), which sets itself apart from Aristotle's preoccupation with forensic and deliberative rhetorics (concerned with justification of decisions about past and future actions respectively). Rather, the 'new rhetoric' is conceptualised as establishing '*a sense of communion centered around particular values*' (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 50-1). Rhetoric that is concerned with identification is used to evoke the values of a discourse community (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995) as accepted 'endoxa' or socially accepted values (Burke, 1989b). This concern with values has widened the relevance of rhetoric as an explanatory approach, for example in understanding how the audience is drawn into the world of a speaker by identification with its characters, ideas and values (Burke, 1989a). For organization studies scholars, new rhetoric is useful in understanding how people position themselves by constructing systems of values with which others can identify and constructing themselves and organizations as reflections of those values. In order to resolve ambiguity people persuade themselves about how they identify with an issue and what values they espouse. This paper uses this second view of rhetoric's role as identification with an action and of self relative to that action. Our interest is in rhetoric as it constructs individual, group or organizational identification with particular actions, values and goals.

This paper draws the above strands of literature together, exploring how rhetoric is used as actors encounter ambiguity in constructing strategic action. From a rhetorical theory perspective strategic ambiguity can be enabling because actors can draw on the vague terms of the message in order to identify the self in relation to different aspects of a strategic action. At the same time, the ambiguity of the message enables the speaker to persuade the audience that this self-identification is consistent with the audience's specific beliefs and interpretations. It is this difference in meaning between the vagueness of what is said and the specificity (amplified by context) of what is received and understood, that is at the centre of strategic ambiguity's effect. To understand this process the audience and their interests must be understood as central to context, while rhetoric is the art of drawing upon strategically ambiguous messages to persuade an audience to act in ways that may be counter to its particular interests. Based on this application of rhetoric theory to the literature on ambiguity we have derived three research questions, which are:

1. How is strategic ambiguity used as a discursive resource by different organizational members?

2. How do different constituents' uses of strategically ambiguous rhetoric enable them to assert their own interests or accommodate the interests of others over time?
3. What role does strategic ambiguity play in enabling collective action?

Research Design

As we were interested in the association between ambiguity and collective action, we used theoretical sampling to select a case that reflected the phenomena under investigation (Yin, 1994). Our study is conducted in a UK business school, 'BizEd', where we were able to negotiate access to follow the construction of a strategically ambiguous goal over time from the perspective of different constituents. Business schools are typically identified as ambiguous contexts because of the professional workforce, diffuse power bases of different actors, multiple goals, and tension between managerial and professional values (Cohen and March, 1986; Slaughter and Leslie, 1999). We examine as our focal event how a specific strategic goal, internationalization, was articulated and rhetorically constructed by different groups within BizEd over a three year period[1]. As the following brief case history illustrates, the internationalization goal (IG) was a case of strategic ambiguity because it had unclear meanings that enabled it to be interpreted differently by different groups according to their own interests in internationalization.

For some time, in School meetings and awaydays, an internationalization strategy had been raised as part of BizEd's ambitions to be a leading business school. In 2001 BizEd developed a Strategic Internationalization Group (SIG), which was charged with developing an internationalization strategy for the School. The initial remit of the SIG was to develop the internationalization strategy and determine the ways to implement it. However, in early 2002 BizEd also underwent accreditation by an international Business School Accrediting agency (BSA). BSA accreditation focused largely on the teaching programs of its member schools. BSA felt that full accreditation of BizEd needed to be withheld partly because of a lack of evidence of internationalization in its teaching programs. BSA stated that they would revisit in 2005 and award or withdraw full accreditation of BizEd, based on a range of indicators, some of which would involve internationalization.

[1] Actual names of the School, accrediting agency and specific dates are changed, to preserve the anonymity of the case. However, the events are accurately represented.

The 'internationalization' goal quickly became central to the campaign for BSA accreditation; '*I think when BSA came […] they didn't think we were international enough. It made us sit back and think*'. The BSA panel wanted the business school '*to have stronger international links with other universities overseas so that perhaps the development of exchange of academic staff, exchange of students, that students spend some time in other countries and vice versa'.* Senior managers began to influence the SIG to incorporate BSA accreditation in the internationalization strategy. For example, in late 2003 the Dean attended an awayday to determine the SIG's mandate; '*The Dean was there and I think it did constrain us in a sense that he was…it was given that it was a very important thing for his strategic objectives that the school had BSA, and so in a sense had that as an influencing factor that was getting in the way of anything which marked the long term strategy*'.

While senior managers appeared to endorse the Dean's perspective, there was considerable ambiguity about BSA as the primary IG. For example, some academics at the awayday contradicted this view, querying '*Why are we going for BSA? Is BSA important? It is a distraction*.' Despite this ambiguity, BSA was incorporated into the IG. For example, a decision was made at the awayday to select foreign business schools as partners on the basis that they were BSA-accredited. For the SIG committee, this push while constraining, was also in some ways helpful in coalescing their agenda, which had previously been beset by ambiguous meanings about the internationalization strategy; '*So really we can't actually decide what we want to change other than BSA at the moment because we haven't got a clue what it means to be an international school*'. The awayday also developed a portfolio of actions that each participant, representing a particular constituency, was to own and implement. However, in the words of one awayday participant, '*there was no convergence, just greater awareness of different perspectives. There was no point in reaching agreement, because all that was necessary was to establish common ground'*.

Within the SIG considerable strategic ambiguity over the IG persisted after the awayday. For example, some protested the BSA goal; '*It may be better that we would actually develop a clear internationalization strategy for its own purposes, and that we develop a vision of what an international business school needs and not just try to suit the understanding of BSA*'. However at other times the BSA goals, such as international teaching partnerships, were proposed as the definition of internationalization; ''*it is important to network … and part of working at another institution abroad and forging links with them is all part of that networking process*'. Still others felt that the BSA definition was potentially dangerous, as it focused primarily on curriculum and teaching elements of internationalization, which might distract people from international research, which would be essential for other important quality indicators, such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 2007. The RAE is a state system for measuring research quality on a seven-yearly cycle, ranking every department in the UK from 1 (poor) to 5* (internationally excellent) and funding them accordingly. As RAE performance has prestige and funding consequences, internationally-ranked research is strategically important for BizEd. There was concern within the SIG that defining internationalization in terms of BSA would switch attention to BSA definitions of international quality, such as international teaching exchanges, rather than international research; '*If you talk about research at international level it tends to mean a high quality of research*'. However, even this definition was ambiguous; '*When we talk about international research it felt very often that it just means international quality, but what I am talking about is collaborating with somebody in another country*'.

Data collection and analysis

As the above story illustrates, the IG development process at BizEd has the appropriate characteristics of strategic ambiguity for examining our research questions. We began to collect data at the formation of the SIG in 2002, completing our data collection after the 2005 BSA visit (which BizEd successfully gained), collecting interviews, emails, documents, and 10 meeting observations. Access was facilitated by the professional relationship that we had with some colleagues in BizEd. This enabled us to identify and rapidly develop rapport with appropriate participants and become familiar with the case background, as well as to maintain continuity over the three years of our study. In total 34 open-ended interviews were collected over three rounds, with all members of the SIG, one round at the start of the process in 2003 (11 interviews), one round during 2004 (11 interviews) and an exit interview round in 2005 before the BSA visit (4 interviews) and after the BSA visit (8 interviews). All interviews were transcribed verbatim, forming the primary data source, supported by attendance at an initial awayday, 6 SIG meetings and three BSA preparation meetings, as well as attendance at the three days of the BSA panel visit, at all of which detailed notes were taken about the way the IG was discussed by different constituents. Throughout the study all authors visited BizEd weekly noting down any relevant events. Additionally, relevant documents and some emails pertaining specifically to internationalization and the BSA were collected, resulting in a data set in excess of 1,000 type-written A4 pages. We now explain how we analyzed these data.

Data were collected primarily by two of the authors, who cross-checked their impressions and tentative findings after the initial interviews and meeting observations, in order to inform the second round of interviews. A coding meeting was then held between the three authors, to discuss emergent findings from the existing data set, with one author acting as an 'outsider' in questioning the findings and themes of those who had collected the data (Evered and Louis, 1981). Following this, a coding schema was proposed, based around different constituents and their rhetorical positions, which we describe below. The third round of interviews was then conducted and all interviews, meeting notes and documents were coded. Each author individually coded the data, which were then examined by the other two authors, with any discrepancies comprising the basis for discussion and further refinement of the coding schema (Miles and Hubermann, 1994). By collecting triangulated data from multiple participants and multiple sources, using multiple investigators and querying and discussing the coding throughout the analysis, we minimized the bias attendant upon a single data source or a single researcher's interpretations of the field (Yin, 1994).

Thematic analysis of rhetorical positions involved four steps. First, all three authors read through the interview transcripts, field notes and documentary data searching for text extracts that could be classified as persuasive discourse or rhetoric. Consistent with other studies (e.g. Jarzabkowski and Sillince, 2007; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005), and with our theoretical framing of rhetoric as a means of identifying the self in relation to a particular issue, and of using that self identification persuasively, we sought text extracts in which the speaker was articulating a position in relation to the IG and BSA. We then created tables of these text extracts, noting the claim being made, who (academic, administrator or senior manager) used the rhetoric, how the rhetoric was used, the assumptions the rhetoric was based on, how the rhetoric positioned the individual actor or BizEd with regard to the actions and goal of internationalization, how the rhetoric constructed ambiguity and how that ambiguity was used by members. We were then able to compare data to establish whether particular forms of rhetoric were articulating the self position and interests of that category of speaker specifically, or were articulating the BizEd position and interests. We also examined the extent to which rhetorical statements encompassed narrow, singular meanings or multiple meanings. From this analysis, we were able to develop four different rhetorical positions, which we now explain in more detail.

First we clustered rhetorical positions, according to whether they were particular to a group of actors. With reference to our theoretical framing of context, we defined this as **'situated' rhetoric**, meaning the use of rhetoric that relies on the power, position and interests of people within a particular role and position within the organization (Goodwin and Duranti, 1997). As we conducted the study we became aware of important differences between groups. The ambitious aim of senior managers to develop an international strategy and the enthusiasm of administrators to expand their work into international programs did not seem to be reflected in the views of most academics. This latter group, although wishing to belong to a School with a greater international reputation, took a narrow, research-focused view of what made an international reputation in their field. We also became aware of differences between senior academics, who considered their and therefore BizEd's international reputation to be already secured, and junior academics, who saw international partnerships with other business schools as a networking and career opportunity, and at the same time saw it as a potential threat to their time for writing articles. These differences became understandable to us as these groups' different interests in the IG emerged from the data.

We thus identified four situated rhetorical positions upon the IG, each of which was particular and discrete to that group of actors. However, all situated actors also expressed rhetorical commonalities in explaining and discussing the IG. Therefore, second, we clustered all examples of common rhetoric about internationalization, to which all four of the above groups subscribed, and labeled this **'accommodative' rhetoric**. We termed this accommodative because it indicated that different groups could adopt a rhetorical position that accommodated others' interests, even where this did not accord with their situated rhetoric (see also Donnellon et al, 1986).

Third, we conducted longitudinal analysis, in response to our questions about the role that strategic ambiguity plays in shaping collective action at a point in time or being drawn on as a resource to assert different constituents' interests over time. Longitudinal analysis involved comparison of the transcripts of the three rounds of interviews for the three years 2003, 2004, and 2005 with field notes of our informal weekly contacts with the research site. We searched these field notes and transcripts for developing temporal patterns. One analytical approach we adopted was to take the same individual or group and consider how that person or group had or had not changed their views. We also characterized the views expressed within a particular year and looked for difference between years. However, we found that throughout the study, the four groups of actors maintained their situated and accommodative rhetorical positions. Furthermore, while there was a strong tendency to view the IG through a situated lens, all actors also shifted easily between situated and accommodative rhetorics, even in the same passage of conversation. In particular, at the time of the BSA visit, people were able to display an accommodative rhetoric in relation to BSA, whilst still retaining their situated rhetorical positions on internationalization. Actors were thus able to shift to an accommodative rhetoric for purposes they considered to be of a temporarily higher priority but this did not alter their situated position, which they continued to hold and to which they reverted once the 'priority' was over. This characteristic provided a particularly strong answer to our question on how strategic ambiguity enables collective action, which we shall provide examples of in the results below.

Fourth, as we realized that rhetorics did not simply merge into a homogenous meaning over time, we then analyzed how it was possible for different groups to hold different situated rhetorics and yet temporarily adopt common accommodative rhetorics. Was there something about the strategic ambiguity of the IG that gave it this mobility as a rhetorical resource? Analysis suggested that strategic ambiguity was a key feature that at times enabled internationalization to be ascribed very **narrow meanings** that indicated little ambiguity about a specific issue. Narrow meanings tended to view the issue from a singular perspective and failed to account for the multiple, contrasting perspectives of other constituents. At other times internationalization could be ascribed **wide meanings** that recognized the potentially divergent and conflicting situated interests and goals of the multiple constituents. In analyzing this feature of rhetoric, we defined narrow rhetorical positions as ones that ascribed a tightly-defined label or meaning that minimized the strategic ambiguity of the IG, whereas wide rhetorical positions attributed multiple, and hence more strategically ambiguous meanings to the

IG. We coded the data to be narrow where the issues being discussed constructed the IG in a very specific way, expressing a single or straightforward view of the goal that reduced ambiguity. In contrast, data coded as 'wide' reflected the IG as a more ambiguous construct that potentially held conflicting meanings or that reflected the participant's awareness of the ambiguity of the task.

We then analyzed whether narrow and wide were similar or different concepts to situated and accommodative. That is, was rhetoric always narrow when it was situated and wide when it was accommodative or could a narrow rhetorical position also be accommodative, while a situated position could be wide? Here we found that situated rhetorics could be wide or narrow, just as accommodative rhetorics could be wide or narrow. Furthermore, when we went back to analyze the data coded under situated and accommodative rhetorics, we could undertake more fine-grained coding that established four discrete rhetorical positions: situated-narrow; situated-wide; accommodative-narrow; and accommodative-wide. We found that these different rhetorical positions served different roles in terms of constituents' ability to pursue their own interests, whilst also serving School-level interests, even where these might appear to be in conflict.

At this stage, our analysis was complete as the four rhetorical positions provided answers to our three research questions and provided us with a conceptual framework about the role of strategic ambiguity. We now present the four rhetorical positions, supported with representative data extracts, and explain their role in enabling different constituents to maintain separate understandings of the IG, whilst also adopting common understandings of it as necessary for School-level actions.

RESULTS

Situated-narrow rhetoric

Situated-narrow rhetoric is situated within the interests and position of the actor and narrowly-defines the IG in relation to those interests and positions. Situated rhetorical positions of four distinct groups of actors were found: junior academics (JA), senior academics (SA), administrators (Ad) and senior managers (SM). Junior academics' situated-narrow rhetoric constructed the IG as providing a background to their personal interests in establishing their research careers, rather than something they were personally engaged with. Thus, junior academics defined the IG quite narrowly as something that had instrumental value in supporting their individual career development, without requiring any personal commitment from them; *'From my personal perspective one of the reasons why I came here was because BizEd was a mostly international institution. It has to do with my career progression in the future'* (JA/2003). This narrow labeling enabled them to rhetorically assert their interests in not diverting attention from important career goals, such as research and developing their teaching material; *'my focus is to become RAE returnable and get my PhD out of the way and I'm also teaching and redeveloping modules. That's where the energy has to be going'* (JA/2005). Through this rhetoric junior academics positioned themselves within BizEd as in a vulnerable stage in their careers, requiring protection from any responsibility for undertaking specific actions on behalf of the IG.

Senior academics' situated-narrow rhetoric embraced the IG by labeling it as central to their interests in publishing international quality research. They defined international research as research that was published in internationally-recognized journals, which accorded them professional prestige**.** By labeling the IG in such a narrow way that situated it in terms of their own interests and goals, senior academics were able to assert that they were already achieving internationalization; '*RAE does actually mean international standing in research. To me it means having been published somewhere other than the UK. So that dimension is already there*' (SA/2005). This rhetoric meant that senior academics did not need to change their existing actions; *'I do not see the necessity to move from here to there'* (SA/2004). Furthermore, they saw internationalization of research as a personal, rather than School-level action; *'we do a lot of international links on an individual basis, research based mainly'* (SA/2004). Through this rhetoric, senior academics positioned themselves as being already fully engaged in constructing BizEd's international reputation, so absolving themselves from any further responsibility for undertaking specific actions on behalf of the IG.

Administrators' situated-narrow rhetoric was enthusiastic about the IG, defining it as links with internationally-located business schools, with which they could develop programs and student exchanges; **'***I would love to have more time to do it actually and ideally this would be a stunning project for someone to really get their teeth into*' (Ad/2003). This narrow labeling of the goal furthered their personal interests by potentially enlarging their roles as program managers; '*I mean, I am interested in the European thing anyway'* (Ad/2004). They were particularly excited about the potential for the IG to enhance the credibility of teaching programs with students; '*I am really keen to* *do a lot more internationally. … we are missing a trick if we don't capitalize on every opportunity we have in order to expand their [students'] horizons and give them exposure to as many international contexts as possible, because a lot of them will be working internationally.*' (Ad/2004). At the same time, they proposed that international programs were a good way to pursue internationalization; '*the [international teaching] project, I think it is such a potentially big winner … I think we should take more care of it'* (Ad/2005) This rhetoric argued persuasively that administrators were important people in the context of BizEd, bringing essential support structures to the IG.

Senior managers' situated-narrow rhetoric constructed the internationalization goal in terms of the strategic responsibilities and priorities of their position. They defined it as ensuring that any aspect of teaching programs, recruitment of students and faculty, and general School policy should incorporate an international element; '*We take our roles seriously so that any issue that comes up that could possibly have an international slant, we raise it*' (SM/2003). This situated and narrow construction enabled senior managers to satisfy their interests in raising the international prestige and recognition of BizEd; *'if you are an international business school it is important that we are relevant to a larger part of the world outside the UK'* (SM/2004). As part of this interest in external recognition, senior managers saw BSA as central to the IG; '*by receiving BSA accreditation it is validation really that we are doing the right things. If you like BSA accreditation would be a signal to us that we have achieved the right goal in terms of internationalization*' (SM/2004). This rhetoric argued persuasively that, in the context of a prestigious school, the IG was inevitable, necessary and achievable for BizEd.

Our analysis of the situated-narrow rhetorical positions adopted by these four groups indicated that they did not change over the three years. Junior academics remained focused on establishing their careers, casting the IG as a background to that, while senior academics focused upon the international-recognition dimensions of their research. Administrators continued to focus on the internationalization of teaching programs, while senior managers saw it as part of the strategic priorities of the Business School and its reputation. By labeling the IG narrowly as a specific goal that was situated within their own interests and position, actors were able to focus on what they regarded as their core activities.

Situated-wide rhetoric

Situated-wide rhetoric is rhetoric that adopts a situated position upon the IG but also acknowledges that the IG has different meanings to other players. Situated-wide rhetoric thus constructs contrasts between own and others' interests in the IG. It is distinct from situated-narrow rhetoric because, although it reinforces situated interests, it does so by acknowledging and constructing wider interests as opposing and less valid than situated interests. For example, junior academics' situated-wide rhetoric drew upon the ambiguity of the IG to question its purpose, if it was not to further their own career progression as academics; '*It seems to me that everything depends on what is the basic purpose of internationalization*?' (JA/2004). This situated querying of the IG cast doubt upon its validity as a goal for junior academics, enabling their resistance to activities that might distract them from their priority of establishing their careers: '*One of these criteria is accreditation … And I was querying this, I was questioning this*' (JA/2004); and '*It is not very clear this strategy. Is the school going to get benefits to absorb whatever experience these strong partners have, or is there not a benefit?'* (JA/2005). This rhetoric acknowledged other interests in the IG but argued that, in the context of their career development, involvement in the IG was opposed to junior academics' interests.

Senior academics' situated-wide rhetoric also acknowledged the wide meanings of the IG, such as international teaching and various interpretations of international research, in order to assert the dominance of their own, situated interests in the IG; '*what do we mean by Internationalization … If you talk about research at international level it tends to mean a high quality of research* (SA/2003). In using situated-wide rhetoric, these senior academics were asserting their independence from other constructions of the IG, such as international teaching exchanges; '*You do teaching, you do research and other things but they need to be balanced and priorities do need to be placed. … A lot of people think well I do enough teaching in the year, why should I want to do even more*' (SA/2005). This rhetoric constructed the audience as having broadly similar interests of achieving internationalisation based on research reputation, thus supporting senior academics' argument that their research-focused international activities should have priority over other constructions of the IG.

For administrators, situated-wide rhetoric expressed their lack of influence over others, who did not acknowledge that their teaching program-dominated construction of the IG was important: '*It's not the most important thing on people's agendas*' (Ad/2005). From the administrator's situated-wide position, academics were seen as not pulling their weight in the IG because they were too focused upon research. They disparaged these academic interests as not supporting administrative definitions of the IG; '*So you go out and write three more publications that doesn't improve the international creditability of either you or the institution*' (Ad/2004). Administrators were thus cast as having to do all the work to realize the IG; '*the average academic is RAE driven. If we hadn't had those full time administrators nothing would have happened*' (Ad/2005). This rhetoric positioned administrators as pursuing IG work that was essential to BizEd's reputation, alone and unaided.

Senior managers' situated-wide rhetoric constructed academics as being self-interested and failing to embrace the full range of BizEd strategic priorities, such as international partnerships; '*They [academics] regard doing something for the good of the business school, involving another institution, as being extra duties'* (SM/2003). Recognizing that academics were not interested in international teaching partnerships, late in 2003 senior managers proposed that financial incentives could be adopted to broaden academic interests in the portfolio of BizEd strategic activities; '*they wouldn't be academics if they were totally obsessed with money, because they could earn a lot more money elsewhere. … However, we are all human and even the most hard nosed academic, who loves his subject, wouldn't mind a bit more money so I think it is absolutely quite a good motivator'* (SM/2003). This rhetoric argued that senior managers were sensitive to the diversity of BizEd members' interests in the IG, whilst also arguing that it was possible to get those members to cooperate in an IG agenda that met senior managers' interests.

In using situated-wide rhetoric, different groups drew upon the ambiguity of the IG to assert the dominance of their own construction of it, whilst invalidating or excluding consideration of other views. Situated-wide rhetoric thus acknowledges but also disparages other possible constructions of the IG in order to generate the grounds for resistance to these potentially opposing interests. For example, senior academics used situated-wide rhetoric to resist international teaching goals, claiming they marginalized the importance of international research; '*They are after continuing international teaching activities and big partners, you know. So it really seems bad that it is international research and it doesn't really fully count*' (SA/2004). They defended their interests by disparaging others' interests in the IG, such as teaching partnerships; '*We should spend less energy on all types of* *relationships with all these universities*' (SA/2004). Rather, senior academics maintained that their approach to the IG would always be more important than other approaches; '*the structured approach to collaborations through partners will always be second to the individual relationships*' (SA/2005).

Administrators were aware of their dependence upon others to cooperate in their interpretations of the IG; '*it is up to the subject group [of academics] to engage with our partners and participate in exchanges*' (Ad/2003). Similarly, senior managers recognized that others' interests could inhibit their own interests in asserting School-level priorities, such as developing international programs; '*They [academics] are told when they come here 'You will get your promotion if you get four international journal articles out, and if your teaching quality is brilliant'. They don't say anything about going a week to teach somewhere else and marking a hundred MBA scripts for French students or something*' (SM/2004). While senior managers proposed a financial incentive as acknowledgement of academic interests, these did not resolve the strategic ambiguity. Rather, academics were offended by attempts to detract them from research; '*BizEd tends to take the view that if we pay people some extra money to do something that would be more motivating…You know, throwing money at them when we are supposed to be doing research*' (SA/2004). Such situated-wide academic rhetoric increased administrators' frustration, which they expressed in their own situated-wide rhetoric about recalcitrant academics; '*It is an incredibly thankless task; banging my head against a brick wall*' (Ad/2005). Throughout the study, academics used their situated interests to assert their independence from organizational goals; '… *why should I do this, what's the added value for me?*' (SA/2005). This also exacerbated senior managers' frustration at the incompatibility of different constructions of the IG; '*we are really struggling to expand on teaching exchanges. … Offering anyone, you could almost throw money at people at the moment and it doesn't mean anything*' (SM/2005).

Accommodative-wide rhetoric

Accommodative-wide rhetoric is rhetoric that uses wide definitions of the IG to accommodate a range of situated interests. That is, wide, abstracted definitions of the IG are expressed by the different situated groups, which accommodate or at least do not counteract their own or others' interests. For example, junior academics acknowledged that '*the implication is to develop a better business school … In my view internationalization is a process and I think BizEd is trying to benchmark itself against* *all the well known business schools*' (JA/2003). Junior academics were thus able to use accommodative-wide rhetoric to construct the IG as good for the school, without being negative for their own interests. Through this rhetoric, junior academics positioned themselves as supportive of the IG, despite their inaction. Similarly, senior academics' accommodative-wide rhetoric acknowledged that, as the IG was good for the School, it was also good for them; '*what's good for the business school is good for the group … [having the IG] certainly enhanced tremendously the profile and the emphasis on international issues throughout the business school*' (SA/2004). This rhetoric positioned senior academics as appreciative of the value of BizEd's increased international visibility, even if they personally had no time to devote to the IG.

Administrators used accommodative-wide rhetoric to get around their feelings of frustration about others' interests. They positioned the IG optimistically, casting academics as being well-intended and the IG as possible to achieve; '*I think the intentions are there and we have a very international staff and very mixed cultural student body*' (Ad/2005). This rhetoric enabled administrators to persuade themselves that, even though academics were not active participants, they were possessed of many advantages that made achievement of the IG likely. At the same time, senior managers used accommodative-wide rhetoric to position their interests in strategic partnerships within broader strategic goals; '*[The IG] is all about being seen to be, and being, an international business school rather than a business school that is very central to the UK …Well, to make network relationships with other prestigious business schools in Europe and elsewhere. It is about having academic staff exchanges. It is about having student exchanges. It is about having programs that say you are based in more than one country, but ultimately it is about being recognized by the community at large as being international*' (SM/2003). This rhetoric, addressed to all BizEd members, constructed the IG as a change from the past ('*an international business school rather than a business school that is very central to the UK*') and positioned any specific actions within a broadly defined goal of recognition ('*being recognized by the community at large as being international*').

This accommodative-wide rhetoric enabled a dialogue between different actors about the value of the IG to all players. However, it also made the IG a catch-all under which every goal could be accommodated. Thus, academic actors could avoid definitions that conflicted with their interests, for example by claiming that the IG was not just about the BSA accreditation; '*we see being a world class school to mean…to actually be recognized internationally for the work we do, and that is way beyond BSA. Miles beyond BSA. It's in another galaxy*' (SA/2003). Senior managers also, in order to avoid confrontation, made broad and ambiguous statements about the multiple ways that the IG could be achieved; '*the goal is to be a truly international school. I think getting the BSA accreditation is an objective in achieving that goal…I think one of the goals will relate to the research opportunities that [BSA] provides and trying to refocus on some of the research activities and some of the other corporate activities, rather than specifically focusing on student exchanges and faculty exchanges*' (SM/2003). While accommodative rhetoric enabled actors to draw upon strategic ambiguity to agree with others' views, it did so primarily by avoiding confrontation over interests rather than by signing up to any specific common actions.

Accommodative-narrow rhetoric

Accommodative-narrow rhetoric is defined as rhetoric that accommodates the interests of a range of actors but does so by attributing a narrowly-defined label to the goal. That is, different actors may adopt accommodative-narrow rhetorical positions because a specific meaning attributed to the IG is in their wider interests, even if it might not be part of their situated-narrow interests. It is thus distinct from accommodative-wide rhetoric, which simply accommodates situated interests within broadly abstracted statements. Accommodative-narrow rhetoric may actually be counter to the positions articulated in situated rhetorics but nonetheless appeals to a specific broader interest to which all actors can subscribe.

Throughout the study, all actors acknowledged that, even though BSA accreditation might not be a personal goal, it was an important School goal. Even if they disapproved of an excessive focus on BSA and were not prepared to engage in teaching partnerships and other actions particular to BSA definitions of the IG, they were sure that BSA would enhance BizEd's reputation, particularly in international business school rankings. Thus, they could acknowledge that BSA was an IG priority. For example, junior academics used accommodative-narrow rhetoric to emphasize the importance of attaining external quality rankings; '*the first goal is probably to please the external agents – high quality agents*' (JA/2003), while senior academics positioned BSA as an important factor in the

School's reputation; '*I think it's important we have a challenge. I mean if we didn't have BSA we would never have the school round to what it's got now*' (SA/2004). This rhetoric constructed different groups as sharing a common interest in BizEd's reputation. Administrators considered the scheduling implications of prioritizing BSA: '*in the last nine months; obviously BSA has been the big issue*' (Ad/2005). Senior managers' accommodative-narrow rhetoric made it clear that, while BSA might not change the actual quality of the School, it was a strategic priority because it would demonstrate that quality to the external world; '*the main goal is to improve our profile so that the world, and especially BSA, knows that we are a very good international school'* (SM/2003).

Accommodative-narrow rhetoric thus enabled different groups to assert that a particular, BSA-driven definition of the IG was a priority. However, it was also clear that this definition had a time-limit. It was a current priority because it would enable the School to acquire the external recognition that it properly deserved, rather than being a sustained course of action requiring a major shift in individual interests. The teaching partnerships and specific activities necessary to demonstrate internationalization from a BSA perspective were not intended to replace situated interpretations of the IG; '*In a very pragmatic sense I think undoubtedly the main goal of internationalization in the short term is to the coming five years to secure for BSA accreditation*' (SIG meeting, 2002).

In the event of BSA accreditation, BizEd administrators and senior managers tailored their accreditation documents in order to emphasize the international links, international faculty and international student body at BizEd. The short term definition of IG as gaining BSA accreditation remained constant throughout, from the initial awayday in 2003 until the eventual BSA visit in 2005. Over the three years, all the relevant BizEd committees carried an internationalization agenda item, while the SIG increasingly focused upon international partnership agreements and policies, which became major sections of the accreditation documents; '*the principal aspects of the strategy are to continue the managed growth in international student numbers and to improve the international and intercultural skills of students through increased internationalization of the curriculum, foreign language courses, the provision of study opportunities at partner schools, group visits and work placements outside the UK*' (BizEd documents for BSA, 2004).

At the same time, senior managers and some key administrators at BizEd put together a group of junior and senior academic staff to appear at various panels for the BSA accreditation body. All staff appearing on panels was sent information in advance, called "*hymn sheets*" with which they would need to be familiar for the accreditation visit. Sessions were held to prime these staff on the specific points that BSA was looking for; '[*Internationalization] is a very important aspect that is likely to be explored by the assessors in all the other panels and we must avoid any contradiction or confusion. Everyone must therefore be 'singing from the same hymn sheet'. The 'hymn sheet' is attached.… Please read and digest this. It doesn't matter if you cannot sing in tune but you need to get the words right!*' (Dean's email 2005). When academics on rehearsal panels talked too much about their research as evidence of their international activity, the commentator counseled them to slant answers more toward what BSA were looking for – evidence of international approaches to teaching (Field notes 2005). It was very clear for staff at this time, whatever their situated interests, that BSA was in everybody's interests. During the BSA visit, academic staff put aside their situated interests and resistance, performing for the benefit of the school, which they saw as being, in this instance, the key priority for the School and hence themselves.

After the BSA visit, when word of achievement was received, a champagne reception for all staff was held to celebrate the accomplishment. It was clear that the SIG committee had successfully met the initial internationalization goal of the School; '*The major focus of internationalization was driven by BSA. So based on that external validation of what we have done, we came out very well in terms of all dimensions of Internationalization as far as they were concerned. In terms of the student body, faculty and research and a lot of those were hits. That would be considered as a measurable success because that first session was just after the last BSA visit, so in a sense it worked*' (SM/2005). However, it was equally clear that this accommodative-narrow definition of the IG was shifting, as BSA was no longer a priority; '*BSA was the first of the three great challenges the School faced in the coming months. The other two are […] and RAE 2007*'(Dean's email, 2005). Thus, accommodative-narrow rhetoric by academics, administrators and managers alike turned towards the RAE as the next narrowly-defined interpretation of the IG that might accommodate all of their interests in being part of a top School. For academics, the IG began to be expressed as; '*Can you do world class RAE research* *that is centered in the UK?...Look beyond 2007 and 2008, we would like four research publications rather than ten, but four really good international publications*' (SA/2005) while for administrators there was acceptance that international exchanges were not central, as the RAE took centre-stage over the short-term; '*We might find in the next couple of years up to the RAE that people just stick to the solid research with statistics attached and send it to a top journal*' (Ad/2005). Accommodative-narrow rhetoric thus enabled actors to adopt a narrow meaning of the IG that was in line with the organization's shifting definitions of the IG, which, during the bulk of this study were BSA but, upon its attainment, changed to the RAE.

Discussion

This paper set out to answer three research questions on the nature of strategic ambiguity by applying a methodological lens derived from rhetorical theory. Specifically, we asked: How is strategic ambiguity used as a discursive resource by different organizational members?; How does different constituents' use of strategically ambiguous rhetoric enable them to assert their own interests or accommodate the interests of others over time?; What role does strategic ambiguity play in enabling collective action? We found four types of rhetoric, which we have illustrated in the results; situated-narrow rhetoric, situated-wide rhetoric, accommodative-wide rhetoric and accommodative-narrow rhetoric. We now develop these findings into a conceptual framework, shown in Figure 1, to discuss these findings. Figure 1 defines each of the four rhetorical positions, followed by 1) explanation of how that position serves as a rhetorical resource for different organizational constituents; 2) how that position is used by different constituents to construct an audience and context in which they can either assert their own interests or accommodate the interests of others; 3) what role that position serves in enabling or constraining collective action around a strategic goal. Figure 1 thus provides answers to the three research questions and provides the basis for discussion of our findings and their contributions to theory and practice.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Quadrant A illustrates situated-narrow rhetoric, which is a narrowly defined construction of a strategically ambiguous goal that asserts the situated interests of the speaker. Situated-narrow rhetoric serves as a resource for organizational constituents by enabling them to assert their situated interests whilst excluding other views of the IG that might conflict with those interests. In situated-narrow rhetoric actors drew upon the strategic ambiguity of the IG to assert that their situated interests, such as developing publications (junior academics), doing internationally recognized research (senior academics) developing student exchanges (administrators), or developing internationalization policy (senior managers) were the appropriate actions for achieving the IG. The ambiguity of the IG, which had no unified, single organizational definition at BizEd, was enabling as a resource from a situated-narrow rhetorical position, because actors could assert situated interest without engaging in confrontation with other views of the IG. In situated-narrow rhetoric the speaker is constructing the implied audience as complicit in their own views of the IG. Situated-narrow rhetoric was thus enabling for individual action, because it constructed a permissive context in which to pursue situated interests. However, by excluding other views it did not enable collective action. In situated-narrow rhetoric it was not necessary to undertake School-wide actions that might compromise one's own interests because these wider interests were not acknowledged. Situated-narrow rhetoric thus answers our three research questions by showing that strategic ambiguity may provide a resource to organizational constituents to assert their situated interests in a goal. Constituents rhetorically position themselves in the BizEd context by asserting their own interests, rather than acknowledging the interests of others. This rhetorical position does not further collective organizational action around a common goal.

Quadrant B illustrates situated-wide rhetoric, which is articulation of a particular constituent's situated interests as opposing other constituents' constructions of a strategically ambiguous goal. The situated-wide rhetoric serves as a discursive resource by representing one group's situated interests as superior to or more valid than others' interests. For example, administrators represented academic interests in publications as not furthering the internationalization agenda of teaching exchanges, while academics represented senior managers' interests in international programs as invalid because they diverted academic attention from (to them) proper academic goals of doing research. In this rhetoric, constituents are acknowledging but not accommodating others' views. Rather, they are asserting their own interests by constructing a context in which other interests are less valid, such that resistance is proper to any reasonable audience. For example, academics expressed righteous indignation that their research activities did not count towards the IG, whilst administrators claimed a moral high ground as the group doing all the work for the IG. These rhetorical positions implied an audience with similar interests, which validated the speaker's position. Situated-wide rhetoric thus inhibits collective organizational action because it provides the basis for constituents to resist collective action in favor of their situated interests. Situated-wide rhetoric answers our three research questions by showing that strategic ambiguity may provide a resource for organizational constituents to assert their situated interests in a goal as more valid than the interests of others. Constituents acknowledge but fail to accommodate other interests, using strategic ambiguity as a resource to assert the 'rightness' of their own interests, which inhibits collective organizational action.

Quadrant C illustrates accommodative-wide rhetoric, which is the articulation of a strategically ambiguous goal in broad, abstract ways that appeal to a wide range of interests. Accommodative-wide rhetoric serves as a resource to organizational constituents by drawing on the ambiguity of the IG to construct such wide interpretations that any specific constituency can be satisfied that their own activities and interests are supported within the IG. On the one hand, this was enabling, as all constituents could assert their individual interests by casting these as accommodated within the broader interests of the School; for example by asserting that what was good for the School was also good for that constituency. At the same time, these wider interests were not antithetical to situated interests but accommodative of them. However, this agreement was attained by avoiding confrontation with others' views; using the strategic ambiguity of the IG to construct a context in which all interests were accommodated, without placing specific expectations to act upon any particular group. The audience implied in accommodative-wide rhetoric is non-judgmental, having the general interests of the school at heart, without linking this to any particular course of action. Thus, accommodative-wide rhetoric does not specify collective action around a common goal. Accommodative-wide rhetoric answers our three questions by showing how strategic ambiguity may serve as a resource by presenting non-confrontational interpretations of a goal that can accommodate the interests of all constituents. While this enables different constituents to both assert their own interests and accommodate those of others, it lacks the specificity to enable collective organizational action around a common goal.

Quadrant D shows accommodative-narrow rhetoric, which is the attribution of narrow and specific meanings to a strategically ambiguous goal in ways that may be accepted as in the interests of all constituents, at least temporarily, in order to enable collective action. Accommodative-narrow rhetoric serves as a resource to organizational constituents by drawing on the strategic ambiguity of the IG to present a particular interpretation, in this case BSA, that enables them to put aside their different interests for the sake of a higher priority. The ambiguity of the goal is particularly important here, as it allows constituents to sign up to an interpretation of the IG that is actually counter to their situated interests because it does not require them to sacrifice those interests. For example, academics could accept the importance of learning the BSA hymn sheets in order to present a particular interpretation of the IG for BSA, without substantively altering their situated interests in doing research, rather than BSA activities, such as teaching exchanges. Accommodative-narrow rhetoric enables actors to temporarily accommodate a wider interest that is perceived as of greater priority. In this rhetorical position, the implied audience is reasonable, and hence aware of the common good to be derived from taking part in an action that is for the collective good. For example, different constituents position BSA as the current priority or a pragmatic short-term goal. At the same time, the audience is not expected naively to sacrifice its own interests but, rather, is to perform a ceremonial act of temporary duration, as illustrated by the use of '*hymn sheets*' to help participants "*get the words right*" for the greater good. This constructs a context in which it is possible for actors with different interests to work together on a common goal, secure in the knowledge that, following the attainment of that goal, they will be able to return to their more immediate situated interests.

Conclusions and implications

The four rhetorical positions in Figure 1 answer our three research questions and provide a conceptual framework for understanding strategic ambiguity as a rhetorical resource that serves the interests and actions of multiple constituents within ambiguous contexts. All constituents used all types of rhetoric over the three years, rather than converging on one position or another over time. Constituents were able to shift between the quadrants of Figure 1 as they saw fit to justify and validate their own, colleagues' and organizational interests and actions, often adopting positions in each quadrant during the same passage of speech, interview or meeting. Co-existence of seemingly incompatible language has been noted by Vaara et al., (2003: 424): '*different metaphors can co-exist perfectly well in organizations and even be sustained by the same persons'*. Our study shows that divergences in interests and preparedness to act could co-exist in BizEd and even enable temporary collective action. The co-existent rhetorical uses of strategic ambiguity as a resource form the basis of our contributions to theory on ambiguity, rhetoric and collective action.

First, our paper contributes to the literature on ambiguity. As shown in our theoretical framing, the literature assumes two broad perspectives. In the first perspective, ambiguity is problematic for organizational change, control, leadership, planning and management, leading to political realignment, inertia and garbage-can decision making (e.g. Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Cohen and March, 1986; Denis et al, 2001; Middleton-Stone and Brush, 1996; Wallace and Hoyle, 2006). In the second perspective, strategic ambiguity, meaning ambiguous strategic goals, provides a resource which top managers can command to generate action by interpreting goals differently to different constituents (Davenport and Leitch, 2005; Denis et al, 1996; Eisenberg, 1984; Eisenberg and Goodall, 1997; Ring and Perry, 1985). The four rhetorical positions in our findings elaborate and extend these findings by showing how both views may be valid simultaneously. First, from the strategic ambiguity-as-resource perspective, the four Quadrants of Figure 1 represent different managerial trade-offs between pushing for collective action and losing political capital. Denis et al (1996) suggest that senior managers in ambiguous contexts often face the dilemma of remaining inactive in order to build political support, or committing to action and thereby losing tacit support. Figure 1 further contextualizes this dilemma. Rhetorical positions in Quadrant A did not threaten managerial political capital as School members were able to compartmentalize their own goals from other constructions of the IG, avoiding confrontation, which enabled individual action but not managerially-directed collective action. Rhetorical positions in Quadrant B led to polarization that risked a loss of political capital for senior managers as, if they pushed for collective action, organizational constituents had established the grounds for resistance. Rhetoric in Quadrant C enabled dialogue that preserved senior manager's political capital but did not enable managerially-directed collective action. It was only in Quadrant D that collective action was possible, with senior managers maintaining political capital because that action was rhetorically constructed to be of a temporarily higher priority than other actions without replacing them. Each of these four contexts supports a different rhetorical use of strategic ambiguity. A rhetoric theory lens thus illuminates the situations under which strategic ambiguity serves as a resource for shaping collective action.

The literature is less informative on the nature and role of ambiguity from the perspective of organizational constituents, tending to see this as managerially problematic (e.g. Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). Our study illustrates how ambiguity plays out for organizational constituents, in which the four Quadrants of Figure 1 provide different solutions to the problem of preserving personal autonomy whilst acknowledging wider organizational objectives. Davenport and Leitch (2005) suggest that there is an under-explored link between strategic ambiguity and opportunities for resistance. Whereas previous research has emphasized the use of strategic ambiguity by managers, our data shows the use of strategic ambiguity by all members, which is relevant to this issue of resistance. Quadrant B provides a context for resistance but, given the ongoing multiple positions adopted by constituents, we suggest that constituents can balance outright resistance with accommodation, in order to prioritize own and organizational objectives simultaneously, according to the rhetorical context in which they are acting (Piderit, 2000). Thus, Quadrant C both provides the opportunity for broadly consensual dialogue in which the School as a whole is acknowledged to be important, whilst also offering an opportunity to avoid confrontation with personal interests. Quadrant D provides a solution to the need to assert personal interests and meet organizational interests, by offering temporary prioritization of organizational goals according to the different contingencies the organization faces. This explanation offers a more subtle analysis of ambiguous contexts where '*whatever commitment does precede action can be vague and confusing*' (Langley et al., 1995: 266). It also represents a more context-sensitive and nuanced account of how multiple organizational constituents experience and draw upon ambiguity, by showing that it serves as a rhetorical resource for all organizational constituents, not simply top managers.

In examining how strategic ambiguity was rhetorically constructed as a resource by different organizational members, we also contribute to the literature on rhetoric. Although classical rhetoric has a rich theory of context, it remains ill-adapted to modern, complex organizations, which are characterised by ambiguity. For example, Aristotle's (2000) notion of one audience and one speaker and the high value he gives to clarity fails to match the multiple constituencies and shifting issues of ambiguity-prone organizations such as ours (Cheney, 1991). In modern times it has been realized that the issue and the way the actor can position the identity of the audience provide the *rhetorical situation* (Bitzer, 1999) and that, because the audience need not be co-present with the speaker, it is more accurate to think of an *implied audience*. However the structures that underlie these rhetorical situations remain unclear. Moreover current notions of contextual structures that influence rhetoric provide no explanation of how actors move from one contextual position to another. For example, Kinneavy (1971) explores several distinct types of discourse that vary with the purpose of the actor, but provides no understanding of the way actors relate one type of discourse to another.

Our longitudinal data shows four distinct rhetorically-constructed audiences/contexts that co-existed during the three years of the study. As explained in the text, actors did not change the way that they constructed these contexts for validating their interests and actions. Rather, they drew upon them simultaneously to serve different purposes, as shown in Figure 1, where we explain how strategic ambiguity was drawn upon in a distinct form in each of these four contexts in order to either assert own interests or accommodate the interests of the organization. Our conceptual model raises conjectures about the co-existence of rhetoric in different Quadrants of Figure 1 that is not well developed in the rhetoric literature. Much literature on rhetoric does not deal with the holding of multiple rhetorical positions simultaneously. However, our data suggest that individuals hold simultaneous viewpoints and are able rhetorically to switch between viewpoints, even within the same meeting or interview. In general, our constituents could emphasize their situated interests by ignoring others (Quadrant A), or invalidating others (Quadrant B), whilst also agreeing that they ascribed to the wider interests of the organization (Quadrant C) and even to specific organizational objectives (Quadrant D). Our conceptual framework, which explains multiple, co-existing rhetorical positions that may be held simultaneously, thus extends existing theory on rhetoric in context. We show that rhetorical context is situated in the personal context but also in the organizational and multi-actor context. Our findings and framework indicate that it is possible for these contextual positions to co-exist, according to whether one's own or multi-actor goals were more important to the immediate circumstances of that context.

This finding on the co-existence of rhetorical positions has implications for future research. While situated-narrow rhetoric enables individual interests and actions and accommodative-narrow rhetoric enables collective actions at the School-level, we suggest that all four forms of rhetoric are important in ambiguous organizations in which multiple constituents hold different but legitimate interests (Davenport and Leitch, 2005; Denis et al, 1996; 2001; 2007; Middleton-Stone and Brush, 1996; Wallace and Hoyle, 2006). Situated-wide rhetoric (Quadrant B), while it may provide a basis to resist others' views, also enables these to be articulated and acknowledged. Similarly, accommodative-wide rhetoric (Quadrant C) enables strategic dialogue which, while it does not lead to collective action, does enable some consideration of the need for collective interests. Situated-narrow rhetoric (Quadrant A) is likely to be more or less constant if individual actors are to fulfill their specific roles in ambiguous organizations, whilst accommodative-narrow rhetoric (Quadrant D) will shift according to the different priorities that the organization faces. Our conceptual framework thus captures a range of rhetorical positions and the shifts between them that enable both the constancy of situated interests and the temporary nature of organizational priorities to be realized. However, this study has limitations in explaining whether such shifts are gradual, with speakers eliding from one position to another, or abrupt, moving directly from one position to another, or what types of contexts might motivate either gradual or abrupt shifts. Addressing these issues is beyond the scope of this paper. We therefore suggest that future research examine the stimuli for, and processes by which shifts take place between the quadrants in Figure 1 and what implications this has for the attainment of situated or organizational interests.

We also provide a basis for further research on collective action, which seeks to investigate how collective action emerges from networks of complementary actors whose rhetorical frames have become aligned (Hargrave and Van De Ven, 2006). That literature has focused on how collective agreement to act arises from explicit argumentation for or against a proposition. This may be by means of the contestation of opposed rhetorical schemes (e.g. Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005) or the contestation of the method of dispute (e.g. Maguire, 2002) or the appropriation of sacred values (e.g. Creed et al., 2004). Our data suggest a different orientation to collective action research: successful collective action is possible even when neither convergence nor commitment is present. However, our data suggest that the role of rhetoric subtly shifts away from the aim of achieving agreement toward supporting each group in justifying and validating its own interests to others. We therefore suggest that future research into collective action examine how groups might accept the co-existence of different interests without needing to resort to consensus, commitment or convergence of interests.

Our findings also have implications for practice. Our data suggest that in ambiguous situations, organizational constituents use multiple rhetorical positions as a discursive resource in order to resolve the difference between their situated interests and organizational interests. From a managerial perspective, these different rhetorical positions provide insight into how situated and organizational interests may be understood, as well as indicating the importance of enabling the co-existence of rhetorical positions in order to avoid polarization of interests and resistance or, conversely, excessive focus upon narrowly-defined interests that are inadequate to meet the ambiguous, multi-faceted dimensions of organizational or multi-actor objectives. Thus our findings can inform the Change Manager who seeks to build organizational commitment to a strategic initiative. For example, if addressing a diverse group of individuals who hold contrasting situated views of the initiative the manager, by adopting accommodative-wide and accommodative-narrow rhetorical positions, may allow the initiative to appeal more to the diverse situated interests of the audience. Reinforcing the need for collegiality and commitment to the common good may encourage appropriate collective action without requiring individuals to discard their situated positions. This avoids the need for people to change their view, instead requiring that they see enough in what the manager has said that they are willing to accept the initiative without violating their situated view or seeking to sabotage the initiative through deliberate action or willful neglect. Alternatively, when addressing a constituent group with a more homogeneous view, the manager may more effectively speak to their particular interests using situated-narrow rhetoric. This would frame the initiative more specifically in alignment with their constituent interests, thus better mobilizing their commitment to action. At the same time, by showing the situated-wide context of a constituency's interests a manager could explain to that constituency how their actions complement others' efforts.

One limitation of this study is that it has been conducted in a business school, a special type of organization. For example, the BSA accreditation involved shortlived commitment of all BizEd members, and this could be argued to be an unrepresentative feature of our study. However, in any situation of multiple conflicting interests, uncertain resources, and dynamic competitive environments, strategic attention will rapidly shift between priorities (Bourgeois and Eisenhardt, 1988). Shifts in strategic attention are also induced whenever participation is fluid, technology unclear, or preferences problematic (Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972). Moreover, business schools, in keeping with other professional organizations, such as hospitals, cultural and professional service organizations, tend to have similar characteristics to other ambiguity-prone organizations (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Cohen and March, 1986; Denis et al, 1996; 2001; Fenton and Pettigrew, 2006). Therefore, the findings are expected to be relevant in other professional organizations. Particularly, as organizations are becoming increasingly fluid, and as knowledge-based work is increasingly important in many industries (Lowendahl, 1997), the findings have increasing relevance to organizations that share these characteristics.

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Figure 1:

Conceptual framework of the role of different rhetorical positions in shaping strategic ambiguity

Situated rhetoric

Quadrant A: Situated-Narrow Rhetoric

Definition: Narrowly-defined, situated construction of a strategically ambiguous goal

Resource: Enables speaker to assert situated interests as those appropriate to a strategically ambiguous goal, whilst excluding other views

Asserts/accommodates interests: Rhetorical use of strategic ambiguity to construct audience as complicit in or having same interests as speaker, so asserting supportive context for situated interests, whilst avoiding confrontation with counter interests, as these are not acknowledged.

Collective action: Does not enable collective action around a common goal but rather asserts basis to act on situated interests

Quadrant B: Situated-Wide Rhetoric

Definition: Articulation of conflict between own and others' situated interests in a strategically ambiguous goal

Resource: Enables speaker to assert that own situated interests are more valid than others' interests in a strategically ambiguous goal

Asserts/accommodates interests: Rhetorical use of strategic ambiguity to construct audience as having similar interests to the speaker, so perceiving other interests as less valid because they are antithetical to speaker (and hence audience's) interests, which constructs a supportive context to resist other views.

Collective action. Asserts basis for resistance to collective action because other interests are less valid than own interests

Narrow meanings

Wide meanings

Quadrant D: Accommodative-Narrow Rhetoric

Definition: Attributing narrow, specific meanings to a strategically ambiguous goal, which are temporarily in the interests of all constituents

Resource: Enables speaker to articulate a common interest and to ceremonially support that interest without substantively changing own interests

Asserts/accommodates interests: Rhetorical use of strategic ambiguity to construct a specific action as in the interests of the wider audience, so establishing a context in which a collective interest can be temporarily prioritized without replacing own interests

Collective action: Provides basis for collective actions according to temporary and shifting priorities, without displacing personal interests

Quadrant C: Accommodative-Wide Rhetoric

Definition: Articulation of a strategically ambiguous goal in broad, abstract ways that appeal to a wide range of interests

Resource: Enables speaker to accommodate situated interests within wide, general interests, so avoiding confrontation between own and organizational interests

Asserts/accommodates interests: Rhetorical use of strategic ambiguity to construct the audience as having the best interests of the organization at heart in a non-judgmental, non-specific way, which constructs a context in which all actions and interests are for the common good, whilst avoiding any specific points for common action

Collective action. Provides basis to assert that all actions support the collective without requiring any specific action

Accommodative rhetoric