

CHANGING UNIVERSITIES

A memoir about academe in different places and times

John Biggs

A fascinating and readable account of the significant changes in universities wrought by the new managerial corporate style, with a loss of many of those features academics have prized as the key aspects of university life. Biggs enriches this account with his own personal story, which he tells vividly and frankly. I could not put it down. I found it first class.

Professor Alan Gregory in *Times Higher Education*

“Biggs is a true scholar, happiest when left to his research and teaching. He had administration thrust upon him ... but he thrust back. The book documents his career, and especially highlights his battles with and dismay over maladministration.

Professor John Kirby, Queen’s University, Canada

*John Biggs tells the story of change via a remarkable career – across four continents, seven universities, and different cultures. The intrigues, the power users and abusers, the games, and the spineless nature of too many within the universities seems not have changed for the last 50 years. More fun to read than the current attacks on universities, *Changing Universities* still raises serious questions about how universities are run, for what reason, and for what benefits. This is a perfect read not only for current academics, especially for those moving to senior administrative positions, but also for outsiders who wonder what happens in the ivory towers.*

Professor John Hattie, University of Melbourne

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Author Bio

As student and as academic, John Biggs has participated in sixty years of change in universities, changes in time and in place. He graduated in Psychology from the University of Tasmania in 1957, obtaining his PhD from Birkbeck College, University of London. He has held academic positions in the University of New England, Monash University, the University of Alberta, Newcastle University NSW, and the University of Hong Kong, holding full professorships in the last three. He has published extensively on learning and teaching in institutional settings. His concept of constructive alignment, described in *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, has been implemented in several countries. Since retiring, he and his wife Catherine Tang have consulted on learning and teaching in higher education in several countries. Also since retirement he has published four novels, a collection of short stories, and a social-political history of his home state, Tasmania.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the following both for jogging my memory and for contributing their own recollections to this narrative: John Kirby, Ross Telfer, John Hattie, Alan Gregory, Michelle Adams, Don Parkes, and Catherine Tang. Many others have unknowingly contributed to my story but they are too numerous to mention by name and in any case many would probably prefer to remain anonymous. I have tried to be as truthful as possible in describing my experiences and have occasionally altered names to avoid causing hurt. It is also helpful that I have outlived certain of my previous senior colleagues.

CHANGING UNIVERSITIES

Introduction

Universities with all their faults – and there were plenty, as we shall see – once had a mission to pursue excellence, in research if not in teaching. Teaching was initially seen as one of the many ways in which research, or at least the scholarship of thinking deeply in a given content area, was ‘published’ or made public to interested audiences. Apart from elite private institutions, almost all university funding in the mid-twentieth century came from the public purse in the belief that universities had an obligation to the public to create and promulgate knowledge unfettered by commercial or political constraints. Effectively, this required that academics had tenure of appointment and the freedom to speak out on issues on which they were expert.

Today, universities have hugely increased their participation rates and have become largely self-funding. As a result, the mission of universities across the Western world, apart from the elite universities such as Oxbridge, the Ivy League and some Australian ‘sandstone’ universities, has become one of preparing students for the workforce across a broad range of professions. Being largely self-funded, today’s universities are run like commercial institutions along corporate and managerial lines. With student fees a major source of income, courses are required to be cost-effective. Students and junior staff of today’s universities would have little idea as to what traditional universities were like and how they compared to the universities they know and experience.

I wouldn’t like to give the impression that, once upon a time, years and years ago, universities exemplified a Golden Age of scholarship, shared by staff and students alike. Far from it. As student or as staff member, I have experienced seven universities in four different countries over a period of nearly 60 years; my experiences range from the traumatic, through the hilarious, to the highly rewarding. In this book, I relate some of the more significant and the more bizarre of these experiences, thereby giving the reader some idea about what universities were once like, how they came to be what they are today, and a guess at what they might be like in future.

These differences, between the universities of thirty and more years ago and those of today, are explored in the final chapter. We see that today's universities are not only suffering problems but are not serving society in the way that they are uniquely capable of doing. I hope those problems may be at least partially addressed by learning from – but not repeating – the past.

I further hope that others will enjoy reading this memoir as I have had in writing it.

John Biggs

Hobart

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Chapter 1

Student Days: The University of Tasmania

The University of Tasmania was established in 1890 but it didn't take any students until 1893. The politicians of the day deemed a university to be 'an unnecessary luxury'. Neither did it help the cause of a new university when its proponents encouraged the enrolment of female students. However, with Tasmania as the only Australian state at that time not to have a university, a university was reluctantly agreed to, and even more reluctantly it was agreed that females may enrol. Such thinking, and the penny-pinching that it fostered, kept the university impoverished virtually until the 1960s, when federal funding overtook state funding. The university was for years governed by a lay council comprising a mix of lawyers and local businessmen who had in common membership of the exclusive Tasmanian Club, the plush and oak-dark centre from which the affairs of Tasmania were ordered.

One of the most colourful of the early staff members was the Professor of Biology, T.T. Flynn, who had a particular interest in unique Tasmanian marsupials and fish. He was astonished at the vast amounts of pelagic fish that then existed in Tasmanian waters and equally astonished that they were not being commercially exploited. Flynn joined several committees in order to establish fishing and canning industries. Another claim to fame was that he fathered Errol Flynn, but TT's more sober habits saw to it that he outlived his high living son by some ten years.

The paternalism of the University Council trickled down to the Chancellor, the Vice-Chancellor, and to the professoriate. As long as the academic staff obeyed their lords and master on Council, their word in turn became law for the students. My father Oscar was a student at the university in the 1920s. He had failed Physics I, taken by the Professor of Physics, Alex MacAulay. MacAulay's son, Leicester, had just been appointed lecturer in physics and he taught Physics 1 in his father's stead the following year. Oscar sang and played an item at a student review called 'Leicester MacAulay's Goat', after a popular song, 'Paddy McGinty's Goat'. Oscar's version made some unflattering points about the drinking habits of Leicester's 'goat', the latter being the

new lecturer's father. The audience enjoyed it immensely; Leicester did not. He strode up to Oscar, still seated at the piano, and hissed into his ear: 'I'll never forgive you for that, Biggs.' His lack of forgiveness manifested itself in a straight forward way: he failed Oscar, year after year. Oscar passed physics only when McAulay was on leave.

The professor of mathematics, E. Pitman, was called Professor Fifty Per Cent for operating on the rule: fail the lower fifty per cent of the class. Oscar all too often found himself in the wrong half, probably he thought because of the disrespect he had shown to Pitman's fellow professor of physics. Oscar finally graduated after eight long years of frustrating study. Those were the days when the judgements of professors, even those at the University of Tasmania, were not to be questioned; there was no machinery for student appeals. Oscar summed up these unhappy experiences with: 'A degree from the University of Tasmania isn't worth a cracker.'¹

A harsh summing up, perhaps, but one not entirely out of keeping with my student experiences at the University of Tasmania some thirty years later. The university at that time was financed by a state government that still saw universities as a luxury. The main body of the university was housed in once-splendid sandstone buildings on the large parklike area to the north of Hobart called The Queen's Domain, while the science faculty was housed in converted army huts in the suburb of Sandy Bay. The University Council, still largely comprising members of the Tasmanian Club, had little idea of what a university should be and continually interfered in academic affairs.

I didn't know all that when I enrolled in 1953. Walking past the old Main Building, with its gothic windows and old world stonework, I stood for a moment gazing reverently at the ivy-covered building. 'Oxford must be something like this,' I thought, wide-eyed in my innocence. I did not know that the state of the University buildings was at that very moment a festering sore between the staff and the University authorities, a sore that would turn gangrenous in less than a year, tearing the University apart in a bitter struggle in which I personally would become involved.

¹I relate my father's experiences in my book *Tasmania Over Five Generations*, Hobart: Forty Degrees South Publishing, 2011, Chapter 25.

I completed Sixth Form at Hutchins School, Hobart, where my father taught science and mathematics. I studied chemistry, physics and mathematics to please my father, and French and English literature because I liked them. Perhaps it was some sort of Freudian retaliation that caused me to fail mathematics first time round in my matriculation exams. I repeated all my subjects the following year in order to do well enough to obtain a scholarship to university. I missed the coveted Tasmanian University Entrance Scholarship but I did obtain the lesser but more generous Commonwealth Scholarship. Today, I would have to take a HECS loan and pay that off on graduation. In that case, I would not have gone overseas to do postgraduate study when I did, and my world would have been a different and less interesting place.

The scholarship provided me with my entrée into university, and a small living allowance to keep me there. My problem was what to study. I had this curious blend of arts and science subjects, whereas most students in those days were either ‘on the arts side’, or ‘on the science side’. To heighten the problem, I had no firm career plans. My mother was a fervid Anglo-Catholic with the result that I had been marinated in a spiky High Church sauce from early days. It was assumed that I would join the priesthood, despite the fact that priests were supposed to be ‘called’ and that was a summons I had yet to hear. So in the absence of any better ideas, when enrolling at the University of Tasmania in 1953, I chose my subjects for their ecclesiastical relevance: psychology in order to help people, philosophy in order to think clearly when confounding smart-arse atheists, and Greek because the New Testament was in Greek and theologians had to study it in that language. As for the rest, I needed advice.

I made an appointment with the Dean of Arts, Associate Professor James Cardno, Head of the Psychology Department. I knocked on his door and on hearing a mumbled response I entered a small room with a table, at the other end of which was an open door into another room, untidy in true scholarly fashion. I could dimly make out a professorial looking shape in a haze of tobacco smoke. Professor Cardno was thin, bowed shoulders, bespectacled; he had a shock of untidy black curly hair, his trademark cigarette drooping from his lips. Just what an Oxford professor would look like, I thought, except *they’d* smoke a pipe.

‘Ah, Mr. Biggs, do come in and sit down.’ The professor smiled his ready, quirky smile, waving me towards a chair.

I warmed to him further when he told me in confiding tones that my present decision was his decision umpteen years ago, but he had decided not to take Holy Orders and to become an academic instead. I wasn't to know that in years to come our positions would reverse: Cardno would eventually take Holy Orders and I would become an agnostic academic.

Professor Cardno agreed that a double major in psychology and philosophy would be a wise choice but 'you'll need to speak to Professor Orr about that. Ah yes, and definitely Greek. No Greek at school? Never mind, you can do a year of Preliminary Greek. See Professor Elliott about that. Now, Ancient Civilizations would round off the Greek nicely and I see you did well in English. Well then, let us say English I to make up the numbers. And there you have it.' He clasped his hands in front of him, head cocked sideways, beaming.

Professor Elliott was tall, his shoulders hunched, a pipe clenched between his teeth. His eyes were horizontal cuts, looking as if they'd squinted through smoke for a long, long time, and above which spiky eyebrows loomed. Talking through teeth clamped on his pipe stem, he agreed that if I passed one year of Preliminary Greek, I would be qualified to do Greek I the following year. Professor Elliott knocked on a door he shared with the next office, where he introduced me to Mr. Waters, who would take me for preliminary Greek. Mr. Waters was tall, well-built, with a Terry-Thomas moustache, matching teeth and similarly posh accent. I liked him, glad to be having him for most of the course and not the intimidating Professor Elliott.

Next, I sought Professor Orr further down the corridor. I entered his room to see another dense cloud of smoke, in the midst of which was a hunched little man with bulbous eyes, grinning like a mischievous garden gnome. I told him I wanted to read philosophy because I was thinking of becoming a priest and – thanks to my mother's urging – I had read lots of philosophy, mainly C. S. Lewis and *The Problem of Pain*, *The Screwtape Letters*...

'No, Biggs,' Professor Orr interrupted in his soft Irish voice. 'C. S. Lewis is not what I would call a philosopher. He's more an apologist for the Anglican viewpoint, you know.' He patted his head with the open palm of his hand as he talked. 'But never mind. I have no doubt you'll be finding out what real philosophy is in due course.'

Greek I meant translating random passages from Euripedes' *Medea* and Herodotus' *Histories* Book 6, with some unseen translation and some English into Ancient Greek. I read and reread the set texts in English translation until I knew them well, and then fell back on The Law of Surface Learning: if you get enough marks for the main tasks, you can flunk the rest, like translating English into Ancient Greek the point of which escapes me to this day. And thus I passed Greek I. Elliott and Waters went to a lot of trouble to take one undergraduate student, at a staff-student ratio of usually 1:1 and sometimes 2:1, in order to accommodate his career choice. Such a profligate waste of resources would not be tolerated in today's universities.

Cardno taught psychology from an historical context. In first year, we studied all the areas usual in those days – motivation, personality, perception, social psychology, memory and intelligence – but from a longitudinal point of view, how a key concept in each of these areas had developed over time. Cardno dictated our lecture notes while wandering the class, pausing every now and then to elaborate and allow discussion. Yes, it was boring but at least we had a good set of notes when it came to revision. Trying frantically to listen and to take notes simultaneously, he explained, doesn't work too well – a proposition that has been very well established by later research.² This was a technique he learned from one of his own teachers, F. C. Bartlett of Cambridge, whose classic book *Remembering* we were studying.

In other universities, the content of psychology courses might have been more contemporary but their hidden curriculum was regressive. Students at Sydney University, for example, were assured by one lecturer that Hullian learning theory was an eternal truth, and by another that Freud spoke with divine authority. Cardno, on the other hand, was completely nondogmatic. His historical approach told us that today's truths are tomorrow's disconfirmed theories: in short, keep your minds open to new evidence, to new arguments. An excellent lesson for undergraduates to learn.

Cardno set examination questions like 'Psychology. Discuss.' Or at the head of the paper: 'Answer about five questions.' Answer four, if you think you can argue in sufficient depth, or three, but by God they'd better be good! This appealed to those who liked thinking deeply about the subject. The normal practice, still current – answer five

² Biggs, J. (1999) *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Buckingham: Open University Press. This book later ran to four editions with Catherine Tang as co-author.

questions out of the ten or fifteen presented – allows students to gain good marks by attempting all five questions in a superficial factual sweep, without actually finishing any questions and without making a genuine argument in the whole of the paper. Cardno's approach, directly or indirectly I'm not sure, laid the foundations for my own work, some thirty years later, on assessment and deep and surface approaches to learning.³

Orr's approach to philosophy sent a rather similar message about not accepting the received wisdom unquestioningly. Orr entered each class wearing an academic gown, a gentle smile and a big book under one arm. He perched himself on a high stool at the front of the class, legs tucked underneath him. Chain-smoking and patting his hair, he read from his large book: his notes on Plato's *Republic* on the nature of justice. After a while he'd stop to discuss how what he had read might apply to issues of justice today, two thousand years later. Increasingly, he drew his examples from injustices in the way the university itself was being administered. The over-riding lesson from Orr's classes was simple and not unlike that from psychology: do not take things on authority. Unfortunately, as we were soon to learn, the university administration was very keen that staff and students *should* take things on authority – theirs.

While studying philosophy I learned about the arguments used concerning the existence or otherwise of God, the chief one being that someone had to create the world. However, the only sort of God whose existence might thereby be proven was that of God the Clockmaker: granted somebody had to make the clock and wind it up to get it going, how do I conclude from that that the clockmaker is a loving and all-powerful being who is open to my personal prayers to change the time just to suit me? And if that being is loving, then he certainly can't be all powerful, otherwise he wouldn't allow his loved ones to suffer so damned much, either from God-created diseases or at the hands of his other loved ones. But if he is powerful enough to intervene on our behalf and doesn't, then that is not what a loving God would do. C. S. Lewis addressed this in *The Problem of Pain*, which was basically my mother's mantra of 'having Faith': God's plans are too enormous for our tiny minds to contemplate, so blessed is the man that putteth his trust in Him.

³A surface approach is when students use low level strategies, like rote memorising, to give the impression that they meet assessment requirements. Students using a deep approach try to maximise their understanding. These ideas, and their relationship to teaching, are expanded in Biggs op. cit.

Christian dogma also held that the Devil is the cause of evil, and we have free will precisely so that we may choose between God and the Devil.

However, the more I learned about the vagaries and depravities of human nature, the less likely it seemed that we have the free will to choose the sort of dark and nontrivial behaviours with which the Devil might think it worth tempting us. The Cardinal Sins and their perverse variants seemed to have a lot more to do with biology, biochemistry, abusive parenting and other traumas than with a deliberate choice to flout the Will of God. Both arguments, about the existence of God and free will, beg the question: to sustain either argument, you have to accept the very point that is in contention, which is that this personal type of God exists.

Thus did the study of both philosophy and psychology quickly undermine my Christian beliefs and any possibility of my entering the priesthood.

Dr. Milanov, the newly appointed philosophy lecturer, was dark, small and round-faced with the tiny, bright eyes of a sweet mouse that didn't quite go with his Hitler moustache. I thought it was a pity about the moustache, he was so nice and gentle; with his bow-tie, he looked as cuddly as a teddy-bear. It was 1954, my second year, and I was doing Logic and Scientific Method – and making heavy weather of it.

Milanov lectured from a desk in front of the class. He leaned forward earnestly, pointing to the inkwell in his desk. 'The proposition is: "There are no crocodiles in the inkwell".'

'He's fuckin' nuts,' mumbled one of the science students sitting next to me.

'And look,' continued Milanov triumphantly. 'There *are* no crocodiles in the inkwell. Go on, look!' He required us to apply the empirical test by carefully inspecting the inkwell. 'See? There are no crocodiles in the inkwell. So it is we use language *a priori* and *a posteriori*.'

As they trooped out the classroom the science student mumbled: 'And we gotta sit through this shit. I'm gunna make an official complaint.'

The science students didn't appear again.

I wasn't too happy about the subject myself. I didn't get the crocodile test at all. Was this what Orr had meant when he'd told me I'd be finding out what 'real' philosophy was? Fortunately, Pelican Books had a very readable book called *Mysticism*

and *Logic* by Bertrand Russell. Russell was a logical positivist and that helped; so too did the fact that Cardno taught psychology from a philosophical point of view. In Milanov's exam, I threw in a lot of Russell and a lot of psychology and managed a Distinction, to my pleased surprise.

I had Milanov again the next year in Metaphysics. This was worse: Kant and Wittgenstein. Pelican Books came to the rescue again with Korner's *Kant*, but Wittgenstein's *Logico Tractatus* was almost totally opaque.

'Look,' Milanov cried, standing up and going to the blackboard. He drew a rectangle on the board and inside the rectangle he wrote this sentence: 'The statement inside this rectangle is false' – like so:

THE STATEMENT INSIDE THIS RECTANGLE IS FALSE

'There you see, it is the use of language! Prove that it is not so.'

I proved that it was not so. The last sentence of *Logico Tractatus*, oft quoted by Milanov, states: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent.' Had I remained silent about whereof I could not speak, thereof I would not have obtained a High Distinction and the Alfred Houston Senior Prize in Philosophy. For that mysteriously obtained outcome, I thanked Russell and Cardno's psychology again. And I must also have done extremely well in Orr's History of Philosophy to have pulled my average up. But basically, I attribute that undreamt of outcome as a matter of exam strategy: you carefully and unobtrusively reset the question you can't answer to one that you can answer.

I was puzzled about more than Wittgenstein in the Metaphysics class the following year. In one lecture Milanov produced a tape recorder. 'Professor Orr says I must to tape my lectures,' he announced. He fumbled elaborately with the switches, shrugged, and grinned conspiratorially: 'I cannot make it work!'

That class continued unrecorded.

The next time the same thing happened. I thought I'd better offer some assistance as I knew how to make it work because I'd previously borrowed Professor Orr's tape recorder to record my father playing the organ.

‘I’ll get it going,’ I said. I went to the front, and with a tap-tap ‘testing-testing’, it was ready.

But Dr Milanov didn’t look too happy about that. After a few hesitant sentences, the recorder recorded the silence of a Milanov who would not speak. Minutes later, he dismissed the class.

In the following class, Milanov suddenly stopped talking mid-sentence. I turned around to see that Professor Orr had just entered and was sitting in the back. He smiled at the students but said nothing for the rest of the class while Milanov stumbled through to the end.

That was the first inkling I had that all was not well in the Philosophy Department.

Chapter 2

A Blacklisted Chair: The Orr Case

In October 1954, Professor Sydney Orr on behalf of several staff members wrote an open letter to the Premier of Tasmania, Robert Cosgrove, published in the Hobart *Mercury*, seeking an inquiry into maladministration at the University. His letter led to a Royal Commission. The staff briefed Reg Wright, a Liberal Senator and formidable silk, but in the end he represented the University instead, for a substantially greater fee courtesy of the taxpayer. He was an even more formidable silk now that he was armed with knowledge of the staff case.

Wright was notorious for his rough tactics. During the Commission's proceedings, Wright accused Orr of plagiarising those notes on Plato's *Republic* that he'd been reading in Philosophy I from Professor Boyce Gibson of Melbourne University (Orr had had previously been employed as a lecturer in Boyce Gibson's department). When Counsel for the staff demanded either that Wright produce proof or retract and apologise, '... all Wright did was to grin and repeat the falsehood a few times to make sure it would be remembered... the incredible lie shattered Orr's defences and hastened his destruction.'⁴

Wright also savaged Bertie Taylor, Professor of English and well liked. Taylor had a known heart condition, broke down and never recovered, dying a year later. Most staff and students were outraged at these tactics. They were overjoyed when the Commissioners made their Report in May, 1955, which vindicated almost all the complaints made by Orr and many of his colleagues about the incompetence of the University Council. The Commissioners ruled that Council comprised too many lawyers and businessmen and should be reconstituted, the Council should defer to the Professorial Board on academic matters, the University needed a thorough rehash of many of its procedures, and the University should be moved to a new site in Sandy Bay. The Chancellor, Sir John Morris, and Vice-Chancellor, Torliev Hytten, were singled out for particular critical comment.

⁴Polya, J. & Solomon, R. *Dreyfus in Australia*. Glebe: Fast Books, 1996, p. 71.

But instead of acting on the recommendations, Hytten, with Council's backing, began compiling a dossier on the staff who had been involved in obtaining the enquiry, starting with Orr. Malcolm Hills, President of the Students' Representative Council (SRC) and student observer on the University Council, told me that Hytten was determined to sack Orr, and that he was likely to do so on the grounds of poor teaching and of putting the hard word on female students. 'You'd better get in first,' Malcolm urged. 'You and your mates should get written statements from other philosophy students saying that Orr is a good teacher, and the girls should add that he hadn't tried anything on with them.'

We did, and gave Malcolm a stack of signed letters for future use, if need be.

Some weeks later I was astonished to read in the local paper, the *Mercury* of 16th February 1956, that Professor Orr had issued a writ for defamation against four of his fellow professors, Elliott, Barber, Carey and Pitman, who had constituted a committee of enquiry set up by Hytten. Orr had issued the writs on legal advice, in order to stop the committee from proceeding further.

Hytten's dossier on Orr was a ragbag of complaints. One was that Orr had 'importuned' a colleague, Mick Townsley, then lecturer in political science. Townsley claimed that a course in political philosophy that Orr was proposing was his territory, and that Orr repeatedly badgered him about it. Shortly after this, Townsley was appointed as full professor without any advertisement for the position. Another complaint was that Orr 'leered' at female students in class; yet another came from his junior lecturer, Kajica Milanov, that Orr harassed him by demanding to see his lecture notes. Orr's demand for these lecture notes was at the request of the Faculty of Science on the basis of student complaints about Milanov's teaching and when Milanov refused to give his notes to Orr, Orr was forced to sit in on Milanov's classes. Milanov thereupon ran to Hytten complaining that Orr had been harassing him. So that explained the disappearing science students, the reluctant tape recorder and Orr's sudden presence in that Metaphysics class. John Polya, the Dean of Science, described the Logic and Scientific course as 'unprofessional raving nonsense'.⁵

Prior to this, Orr had foolishly asked Milanov to psychoanalyse him, and in the course of the analysis Orr had told Milanov that he used to dream that he was an

⁵ Polya, J. & Solomon, R. *op. cit.*, p. 78.

illegitimate son of Edward, Duke of Windsor. He also told Milanov that when Orr was a lecturer at Melbourne University he had lived in a *ménage à trois* with his wife Sadie and a Miss A (not a student). Information obtained in the course of psychoanalysis is highly confidential but Milanov had passed Orr's confidences to Vice-Chancellor Hytten. All of which went into Hytten's dossier. However, the Chancellor of the University, Sir John Morris and Chief Justice of Tasmania, advised Hytten to drop it: his dossier was insufficient grounds for dismissal.

Following Malcolm Hills' advice, I had obtained a written letter from Suzanne K., a brilliant student doing languages and philosophy, in which she, along with many other female students, had stated that Orr had always acted with propriety. However, in late February 1956, Suzanne denied this with spectacular results. She told her father that she and Orr had been lovers. Her father went immediately to Orr's house and beat him up. Next day he rampaged on to the University, demanding that Orr be sacked forthwith.

Hytten's attempt to sack Orr the previous December having failed, here was a gift from the gods. The spicy details about the *ménage à trois* in Melbourne would be hugely damaging – but irrelevant – in the event that Orr was facing a morality charge. And here was one on a plate.

Orr was advised to resign by his lawyer, not as an admission of guilt concerning Suzanne, but to protect his family against public disclosure of the Miss A. affair in Melbourne. Orr presented his resignation to Hytten who assured him that Council would accept it at the next meeting. But the wily Hytten allowed Suzanne's father to harangue Council before presenting Orr's resignation.

Council members, now pumped up with virtuous outrage, refused to accept Orr's resignation and his request for six months' notice, which was his by right. Instead, they summarily dismissed him – that is, without notice. His request for six months' notice was dubbed 'blackmail' by one member; another pointed out that if Orr was sacked without that six months' salary he would be too impoverished to appeal. As the Solicitor-General, Stanley Burbury, later Governor of Tasmania, said: 'What we shall do to Orr will cost us less than six months' salary.' He was wildly wrong in that assessment.⁶

⁶ Burbury's conduct in the Orr Case is well documented: Eddy, W. *Orr*, Sydney: Jacaranda, 1961, pp. 200-259; Polya and Solomon, *op. cit.* pp. 120-6, and most telling of all, the University's own transcript in the University of Melbourne Archives: Stout Collection 1/98-99, 106M, 154. That transcript agrees very closely with Orr's own transcript in 'The Toulmin Letter', a copy of which I have in my possession.

Orr was required to prove his innocence of Suzanne's charges to an ad hoc committee. He was not provided with details; he was not allowed to attend University, to interview witnesses, or time to collect evidence. The committee allowed accusers to be heard in Orr's absence, and witnesses against him presented their evidence in each other's presence, often prompting each other. Orr was refused a transcript, so he took his own while conducting his own defence.

Under legal advice Orr denied all charges. Accordingly, he was sacked for 'Refusing to answer to allegations pursuant to his obligations as a Professor.' And if he hadn't denied the charges he still would have been sacked, on the basis of the allegations themselves. Orr wrote in a letter to his philosopher friend, Stephen Toulmin: 'I had a feeling of panic, the feeling of being without the protection of the law.'⁷

Council had severely under-estimated public opinion. If having sex with students was the issue it was well known that there were more obvious candidates than Orr, and a savage summary dismissal would almost certainly not have been the penalty. Academics nationally and internationally were outraged both at the process leading to summary dismissal and at the dismissal itself. The common interpretation was that, since Orr had been a leading figure in obtaining the Royal Commission that had been so critical of the university's administration, this was comeuppance time. Public donations enabled Orr to proceed with his legal appeals and were his principle means of support for the next ten years. Academics internationally declared the Chair of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania black – and it remained unfilled for the next ten years.

Orr sued for wrongful dismissal in the Supreme Court, Hobart, in October 1956, before Mr. Justice Green. According to a widely circulated rumour, Green was overheard in the Tasmanian Club reassuring his audience: 'Don't worry, Orr's not going to win.' Whether he had said that or not, his conduct of the case suggested he might well have. As soon as Orr provided an alibi for one of Suzanne's dates Green allowed another date to be provided. Some events had had three different sets of dates from the initial allegations to the end of the case. When an Ansett airline ticket proved that Orr was in Melbourne when Suzanne said she was with him in Hobart, Justice Green said she was simply 'mistaken' as to the date. 'Mistaken' also were five other witnesses who had provided alibis for Orr over other alleged meetings with Suzanne. As to the letter I had collected from Suzanne, what

⁷ Orr to Toulmin, 16th August, 1957.

else could she have written when approached by a fellow student, asked the protective Justice Green.

The lawyers for the University threw in the lot: poor teaching, the Milanov and Townsley complaints, the story of the *ménage à trois* in Melbourne, and Orr's dreams of being of Royal descent. While these made for some spicy newspaper headlines, Justice Green dismissed them as either irrelevant or insufficient to justify dismissal. However, he did rule it as proven that Orr had had sexual relations with Suzanne, and that that was sufficient cause to justify summary dismissal. He also ruled that the relationship between an academic and the employing Council was that of 'master and servant', contract and tenure notwithstanding. This ruling was necessary because Orr had been sacked, in essence, for disobedience. He had been required to 'respond to allegations' and he hadn't, apart from denying them. So it was necessary to rule that failure to obey Council's direction to plead guilty to the allegations even if they weren't true was an offence justifying summary dismissal. That last ruling guaranteed that FAUSA, the academics' union, would fight to have that interpretation overturned, as it later was.

Orr appealed to the High Court of Australia. The High Court would be a different matter, Orr averred, patting his hair, lips pursed, eyes bulging – looking more like Teddy Windsor than ever – as he explained to us student supporters that he was especially worried about a particular date. Suzanne had claimed that she had picnicked with Orr at Kingston Beach at lunchtime, 16th December 1955. This was the day of the Council meeting at which Hytten was proceeding with his dossier of complaints. Professor Sam Carey, a Council member, had warned Orr about it and advised him to hang around the University.

Orr had accordingly 'hung around', talking to several people at the University, all of whom had testified to that effect. So Justice Green had had to tweak their evidence a little, leaving enough time, between noon and 2 p.m., for Orr to speed to Kingston Beach to have a picnic with Suzanne, and speed back to the University to meet all the other witnesses. So the question was: did Orr see anyone between noon and 2 pm that day? And the answer: yes, John Biggs and Manu Bunnag, a Colombo Plan student from Thailand. How that came to be known is itself an extraordinary story.

Dr. Bert Engisch had once been GP to the Biggs family. He later moved from general practice to something close to psychiatry, specialising in psychosomatic disorders such as asthma, eczema, phobias, allergies and the like. He first used hypnosis and later drugs, achieving some stunning successes.

Hypnosis was a topic in my psychology honours class. I asked Cardno if he would like Bert to talk to the class about his work on hypnosis. Cardno thought it an excellent idea. In his talk, Bert explained how he had found hypnosis useful, particularly with what he called automatic writing in order to recover lost memories. The patient would be taken back to a particular day under hypnosis and then instructed to write about it. He asked the students if anyone would volunteer.

Pat volunteered. Sitting her comfortably in a chair, Bert held the tip of his fountain pen above Pat's eyes. He suggested her eyes were becoming heavy and that she was feeling as if she was going to sleep. He counted down from ten and suggested she would be under when he arrived at zero. She was. Bert nominated a date at random and instructed her to write what had happened that day. Sleepily, she scrawled out a couple of pages. He then brought her back: 10...9...8...7... When she was fully awake, he asked: 'does this writing mean anything to you?' It did. She'd written about an incident, not particularly important, that she had completely forgotten until she read her writing.

I thought of that hiatus between 12 and 2 pm on the 16th December, 1955. What if Bert put Orr under, suggesting he write about who he might have talked to at that crucial time? Bert and Orr agreed it was worth trying.

On the following Sunday I introduced Bert to Orr at the latter's place in Derwentwater Avenue. They retired to Orr's study while I waited in the living room.

Bert came out first. 'You'd better put your thinking cap on. You're involved.'

The automatic writing had indicated that I had seen Orr on the crucial date: could that be substantiated? If so, Orr could not have been with Suzanne at Kingston Beach as alleged, a conclusion that had important implications.

I checked my papers and found a note confirming that I had seen Orr at lunchtime on the 16th of December, 1955, about the possibility of a joint philosophy-psychology honours year in 1956. Leaving Orr's office I had bumped into Manu, who told me he was seeing Prof Orr about his Colombo Plan scholarship. So Orr had had *two* interviews in

that crucial period between 12 and 2 p.m. That evidence hadn't become available until after the Supreme Court case.

Orr appealed to the High Court but his appeal was dismissed. A High Court appeal required that new evidence had to be unavailable at the time of the hearing in the lower court; technically, my evidence re the 16th December could have been available for the lower court and was therefore inadmissible.

My evidence did however weigh with an enquiry held by the Presbyterian Church in 1959. Orr was a member of the congregation and this was in effect a test of his fitness to remain so. I was in England at that time so Orr asked me to provide an affidavit testifying that I had met Orr on the 16th December 1955, between 12 and 1 pm. I confirmed this in an affidavit, sworn in Luton where I then was. The Presbyterian Court looked at this and other new evidence, as well as the flaws in the old, and concluded that Orr had suffered an injustice. They made a powerful public statement, urging the Government and the University to look at the Orr Case again. This statement was strongly supported by the Anglican Bishop, Geoffrey Cranswick, and the Roman Catholic Archbishop, Gilford Young.

The Government and the University did nothing of the kind.

Orr, living on donations, was desperate to resume the Chair in Philosophy which had been vacant since 1956. The international academic community having declared it black, the University was unable to fill it. In the three years since his sacking Orr had been helped considerably by powerful allies, including Roy ('Pansy') Wright, Professor of Physiology, Melbourne University. Roy Wright was the brother of Reg Wright, Counsel for the University.

In 1958, while answering his telephone in his study at Derwentwater Avenue one night, two shots were fired at Orr, one grazing his forehead. But instead of trying to find the culprit the police arraigned Orr before Magistrate Brettingham-Moore, charging him with attempting to falsify evidence. He was accused of getting an accomplice to fire the shots, then picking up one of the bullets and deliberately grazing his head to make it look like attempted murder. The multi-talented Pansy Wright, appearing as a ballistics expert, proved that a recently fired bullet would be far too hot to be picked up, and even so, could not have created the sort of abrasion on Orr's head that was there. There the matter rested. Orr had been assaulted in his own home, and later an attempt was made to kill him. On

neither occasion did the authorities attempt to bring the perpetrators to justice, instead blaming Orr himself for what had happened.

Eventually, under enormous pressure from the churches and from academics nationally and internationally, the University agreed to a settlement. In May 1966 Orr was awarded a lump sum of £16,000 (\$32,000) in compensation for ten years unemployment, almost all of which was swallowed up in outstanding legal and other debts.

In July that same year he died of an ongoing heart condition that had been hugely exacerbated by stress.

There was a follow-up to the Orr case that caused me considerable angst. In 1994, a friend, John Hattie, asked me: 'Have you read *Gross Moral Turpitude* yet?'

'Not yet. I'm about to buy a copy.'

'You can have mine. You get a mention – and it's not nice.'

I read on page 117:

Engisch said that in December 1955 a male student Orr had referred to him, whom he had been treating for a personality disorder (even though he worked in Launceston) told him 'that Orr was very anxious for me to treat a girl, if he could persuade her to come. I am not sure of the exact date I learnt the name of the girl was Suzanne Kemp'...Some years later he did name the student: John Biggs, who was, conveniently, still in England... When I [the book's author, Cassandra Pybus] asked John Biggs about these events he was... puzzled to find he was cast in this pivotal role during his absence in England.⁸

Too right Biggs was puzzled! Did this mean that Orr had been treating me for a personality disorder before referring me to Engisch? Or simply that Engisch had been treating me for a personality disorder, having been referred by Orr? But Orr hadn't referred me to anyone. Bert Engisch did once prescribe a sedative, at my request, to ease my exam nerves; on another occasion I rode on my BSA Bantam to Launceston to be hypnotised. We were studying hypnotism that year and I wanted to know what it felt like. However I couldn't be hypnotised and as I was still curious, Engisch gave me a shot of pentothal and methedrine instead – they call it ICE these days – which Engisch sometimes

⁸ Pybus, C. *Gross Moral Turpitude*. Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1993. p. 117.

used to see what a patient's unconscious would pour forth. In my case it didn't pour forth anything, but I felt great; I was *wired*. I rode back to Hobart a very happy little motorcyclist, singing at the top of my voice. But none of this could be called a 'personality disorder' and Orr had had nothing to do with any of it. In any case, wasn't revealing a patient's name and disorder highly unethical – a hanging offence if untrue?

I rang Pybus and voiced my concerns. She said she was only going on the documentation. She gave as her source the R. D. (Pansy) Wright Papers in the Melbourne University Archives. I searched the Wright Papers and found the document Pybus cites, in which Englisch does indeed say that Orr had referred a male student to him, and the original of an affidavit by Englisch naming that student as John Biggs. I recognized the handwriting as that of Englisch; there was no doubt he had written it.

It looks like Englisch and Orr had tried to build a case questioning Suzanne's sanity with these fictitious psychiatric referrals while I was safely in England and unable to dispute matters. Around the time that Englisch had written that interesting little piece of fiction he was using drugs therapeutically – like the ICE he had given me – and had himself become addicted. Soon after he had written the letter identifying me as being referred to him by Orr, he was struck off the list of medical practitioners in Tasmania and he moved to Sydney. As we have seen, there are several things that do not add up in the Orr Case – this is an anomaly from the Orr side, for a change.

There have been several books on the Orr Case. The first, *Orr*,⁹ takes the line that Orr was set up by the University because of his role in initiating the Royal Commission, a case that is backed up with extensive quotes from the Supreme Court transcripts, which point out the anomalies in the University's case.

Cassandra Pybus, in *Gross Moral Turpitude*,¹⁰ argues that the power imbalance between teacher and student makes it wrong under all circumstances for a teacher and student to have sex: Orr did, he was sacked, justice was done. She does not, however, adequately consider the poisonous motivation of the University authorities given the Royal Commission's findings, or the inconsistencies in the evidence presented to the Supreme Court that disallow the conclusion that Orr had had sex with Suzanne *beyond*

⁹ Eddy, W.H.C. *Orr*. Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1961.

¹⁰ Pybus, op. cit.

reasonable doubt. And many would disagree that consensual sexual relations between teacher and student is under all circumstances sexual harassment, let alone worthy of dismissal without notice.

Pybus's proto-feminist line of argument attracted the wildest speculations:

what was it about Orr's whole approach to his teaching, including his sexual and other predations, to possess even the appearance of a valid pedagogy?... it's the students' sexual subjectivity that is to be freed up and get spiritualised through an 'emotional' reading of Plato.¹¹

And I had been wasting my time with Milanov's crocodiles when my sexual subjectivity could have been freed up and spiritualised in Philosophy I! Maybe I hadn't read my Plato emotionally enough.

John Polya, Associate Professor of Chemistry, claims he was next in line for Hytten's hatchet, but the chaos following Orr's dismissal stayed Hytten's hand. Polya and fellow academic Bob Solomon also conclude that, although Orr had acted quite foolishly in many ways, the evidence was not conclusive that he was guilty of an affair with Suzanne.¹² They state that Orr was treated abominably by the University, and by the legal, political, and educational sectors of the Tasmanian Establishment. The official fury at Orr, and the determination to 'get him', was palpable. The only sectors of the Establishment that had supported Orr were, ironically, the Anglican, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic churches.

Another staunch supporter of Orr was the highly respected E. Morris Miller, foundation chair of Psychology and Philosophy and a previous vice-chancellor of the University. He deplored the 'doubtful' university inquiry, the proceedings in the lawsuit brought by Orr for wrongful dismissal, the 'disgraceful' attempted murder of Orr at his home and the appeal heard in Sydney. He dismissed these aberrations with a quotation from Samuel Butler: 'Conscience is thoroughly well bred and leaves off talking to those who don't want to listen.' Miller claimed to have been able to see the Orr case in its historical perspective, 'unlike certain sections of the community'. For his views on the Orr

¹¹ Minson, J. 'Professor Orr and the eroticisation of teaching.' *Australian Universities Review*. 36, (2), 1993, 45-48.

¹² Polya and Solomon, *op. cit.*

Case, Miller was reviled to such an extent that his biographers suggest it may well have played a part in his eventual mental breakdown.¹³

In his history of the University, Richard Davis points out that the procedures the University had established pre-Orr had been designed to serve local, not academic, ends.¹⁴ The Council had over-ridden the Professorial Board on purely academic matters, which is not accepted practice in universities – although it was to be accepted practice by the University of Newcastle Council, as we shall see in Chapter 9. The Tasmanian Royal Commission exposed these anomalies and recommended changes, but instead of adopting them, Hytten and Council shot the messenger – so brutally that the University of Tasmania found itself for years blinking guiltily in the national and international spotlight. After ten years of intense pressure a new administration put proper procedures in place, including those regulating dismissal procedures. These new Tasmanian procedures became a model that other Australian universities eventually adopted, but which the Dawkins attack on universities in 1988 eventually undid (see Chapter 17).

In February 1955, my father mentioned that Hutchins School, an Anglican private school where he was a teacher, had a temporary staffing shortage in Term 1. As I only had two subjects to pass to complete my degree, Psychology III and Philosophy IIIB, I offered my services. I thought it would be an interesting experience and I could do with the cash, with a thirsty motorcycle to run. The Headmaster, Bill Mason-Cox. Cox interviewed me and offered me the princely sum of £5 (\$10) per week.

I was dealing with upper secondary students, and I have to say it wasn't a howling success. I was physically indistinguishable from my students, which was a problem. However, my time there provided me with a pool of subjects for my third year psychology project, which I doubt would get past the Ethics Committees of today. Two Year 9 classes provided me with experimental and control groups. I divided the experimental class into friends and non-friends by asking 'Who would you most like to sit next to in class?', and

¹³ Reynolds, J. & Giordano, M. *Countries of the mind: The biographical journey of Edmund Morris Miller (1881-1964)*. Hobart: Melanie Publications, 1985. p.158.

¹⁴ Davis, R. *Open to talent: The Centenary of the University of Tasmania, 1890-1990*. Hobart: University of Tasmania, 1990.

then I got them to fill in a racial attitude scale before and after they discussed different ethnic groups who had recently migrated to Tasmania – mainly English, ‘Balts’ from Northern Europe and Mediterranean groups. I found that the friends groups shifted positively in their racial attitudes, while the non-friends didn’t shift at all. Conclusion: if you want to change peoples’ opinions about asylum seekers, talk it over with your mates, don’t waste your time rabbiting on with strangers in the pub. My supervisor, Ken Miller, wrote it up and it was published – with him as senior author – in a leading US journal and later reprinted in a book of readings.¹⁵

The following year, Hutchins had another staffing problem while their form master did three months’ National Service: amenable Year 3s this time. I volunteered again, teaching full-time for the whole of the first term. This worked much better than teaching the big kids, and it again afforded me the opportunity to gather research data for my Honours thesis. This topic would have been even more problematic had there been an Ethics Committee: I asked another teacher to rate the students in his class on a maladjustment scale. I selected the six most ‘well adjusted’ and six most ‘maladjusted’ and submitted them to a battery of personality tests, including the Rorschach and Thematic Apperception Test, administered by my untrained self, to uncover the dynamics of maladjustment. Nothing very much emerged that I could see, except that the boy considered the most maladjusted by his teacher later became one of Tasmania’s richest and most ruthless businessmen. But my lips are sealed.

I had originally intended to do a joint Honours degree in psychology and philosophy, as I had discussed with Orr on that fateful lunchtime in December (see p. XXX), but by the following year that was no longer an option: the Philosophy Department consisted only of one person, Kajica Milanov, who after his betrayal of Orr had lost the respect of at least this student.

Teaching full time for the whole of first term in my honours year had not been a good idea. By the winter term it was clear that I had seriously underestimated the demands of the course. From then on, I spent all my time studying. I took notes from the texts, then notes of the notes, then notes of these notes. When the exams loomed, I made up a series of generic exam questions, which might be tweaked to fit the actual

¹⁵ Miller, K.M., & Biggs, J.B. (1958) Attitude change through undirected group discussion. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 49, 224-228. Subsequently reprinted in Ripple, R.E. (Ed.) (1964) *Readings in learning and human abilities*. New York: Harper and Row.

questions, and walked around the garden constructing an answer to each of the generic questions in my head, which I then learned thoroughly.¹⁶

There were four of us in the Honours class. One girl had obtained high distinctions in all her subjects from first year. She was a dead cert for First-class Honours. I thought my chances were at best Upper Second, because I doubted very much that they would award two Firsts – that would be fifty per cent of the class. But fortunately Cardno was not obsessed with following the bell curve, as many department heads were (and still are). My technique of developing summaries of flexible detail worked. There were two awards of First-class Honours in our year.

But what career options did an honours degree in psychology open up? I didn't see myself as a clinical psychologist, but my forays into teaching had made me interested in educational problems. Here was the answer to that question that typically bothered kids of my generation: 'And what are going to do when you grow up, Sonny?'

Something to do with applying psychology to education.

¹⁶ My wife Catherine called this process 'deep memorising' in her dissertation on how students prepare for different types of assessment. Deep memorising, often confused with rote memorising, is standard practice amongst Chinese students.

Chapter 3

From Theory to Practice: Challney Secondary Modern School

I needed to do postgraduate study to realize my career choice, but certainly not at the University of Tasmania. After the malevolent dishonesty that senior administrators and some academics had displayed in the Orr Case, I decided to do what many young Tasmanians were then doing: go to England where I would study for a PhD. How to support myself? I learned that with a degree, even if it was in nonteaching subjects like psychology and philosophy and the lack of a teaching qualification notwithstanding, I would be qualified to teach in an English secondary school. My strategy was therefore to obtain a teaching position and then take it from there. I applied for positions all over England, and received just one offer, from the Luton Education Committee, and that was through the agency of a family friend.

I reported to the Luton Education Office where I met the Chief Education Officer, Dr. John Corbett, a tall, kindly looking man. He told me there was a vacancy at Challney Boys' Secondary Modern School, where the senior maths master and deputy headmaster was ill, long term. Corbett looked at me speculatively: 'And don't let the big boys get on top of you!'

He referred me to the staffing officer, a Mr. Garnsworthy, who with moustache, pipe and white scarf, looked like he'd just landed his Hawker Hurricane at Luton Airport. He took me through the paperwork. He told me what bus to catch and where to get off. He looked at me speculatively as he bade me farewell: 'And don't let the bigger lads get on top of you, old chap!'

The Headmaster of Challney was the dour Mr. Hamilton-Fox, the spitting image of Alistair Sim on an off-day. He too looked at me speculatively: 'And don't let the big boys get on top of you!'

'Modern' school kids were the rejects of the English selective school system; they had failed the Eleven Plus exam and so missed out on both Grammar and Technical School. Yet despite the warnings, these working class kids struck me as

better behaved than the young gentlemen from Hutchins: ‘...extremely courteous and respectful, without being shy or nervous as so many “well-mannered” Australian children are,’ I wrote home.

Hamilton-Fox gave me a light load, plugging gaps in the final term of the year. Next year, he said, I would be given a full load and be form master of 2B, a nice class he said, in an annex away from the main school. In keeping with my career choice, I tried using my psychological knowledge in my teaching but to tell the truth, I couldn’t see that the psychology I knew suggested anything much, beyond working from the kids’ own interests and keeping them active. I wrote the start of a corny thriller and got them to finish it with their own endings, telling them that if they wanted their readers to understand their stories they needed to make their texts intelligible by using basic grammar and spelling. They voted on what they thought were the best endings, the winning authors receiving chocolate.

Most of what I learned about applying psychology to the classroom came from negative instances. I didn’t know if the school was following the American psychologist E.L. Thorndike’s precepts, or just an honoured English tradition, but either way corporal punishment was the default for misbehaving. When the deputy headmaster first introduced me to my class, he concluded: ‘Mr Biggs comes from Australia and he has a kick like a kangaroo.’

The expectation, by both school authorities and the boys, was that I would physically assault them, at my discretion, for offences ranging from more-than-trivial to less-than-capital. The approved method of assault was ‘slippering’: the offending boy touched his toes while the teacher slammed his backside with a flexible ‘slipper’, as runners were called. The incident was to be recorded in the Punishment Book. One teacher recorded that he had slippered 50 boys in one day.

I didn’t think much of this and wondered what the kids thought. I organized a class debate: ‘Should masters use the slipper?’ After lively discussion, I held the vote: For, 23; Against, 8; Abstentions, 1. I asked them if they bore any malice to the master who had slippered them. With very few exceptions they said no, as long as they were given due warning.

I wrote home to my father, who didn't use corporal punishment although at that time most teachers at Hutchins did, telling him about our class debate. 'That surely is the answer to all opponents of corporal punishment,' I wrote.

So I used the slipper and it was received without rancour as far as I could tell. One day I overheard one boy, Capell, tell another boy that Biggs couldn't slipper as hard as Yockney, another teacher and a friend of mine. The next time Capell was due to be slipped, I recalled his assessment to the class, adding that he would not be saying *that* in future. I took him out into the corridor in order to assault him in the approved manner. On returning to class, the now slipped Capell grinned at the class and stage-whispered, 'Yockney!'

It had become a sick game. Why did the kids seem to take it in such good part? I did a little research on the subject and came up with this by a psychologist E. Wulffen writing in 1913:

...the initial pain soon gives way to a sensation of warmth which envelops the whole of the seat like a soft, warm blanket, producing a pleasurable sensation and this may easily connect up with the sexual area. Boys after a sound thrashing are often surprised by the subsequent pleasant sensation of warmth in the seat and for this reason they sometimes endeavour to obtain a repetition of the chastisement which may ultimately affect them sexually.¹⁷

I ceased slipping forthwith.

But there is possibly even a darker side to this. Desmond Morris¹⁸, in discussing the origin of bowing, by which a male underling acknowledges the seniority of his master, writes that bowing occurs in apes, except that the low status ape faces *away* from the silverback alpha male when he bows. The latter then sodomises the proffered orifice, not out of passion, but to let the underling know who's boss. It is an act of power, just as a conquering human army rapes the women of the vanquished. Morris's point was that, as we share some 98 per cent of our biology with the great apes, our social behaviour is significantly determined by that common inheritance. The parallel

¹⁷ Quoted in Pearsall, R. (1983). *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality*. Harmondsworth, Mdx.: Penguin Books.

¹⁸ *The Human Zoo*. London: Cape, 1969.

with using a slipper on a lower status male in a bending posture, and the implications of that, are disturbing. At least corporal punishment is now illegal in British government schools, as it is elsewhere in the Western world.

I discovered another example of psychological theory and how it stacked up with Challney malpractice. In the annex, away from the main school, 2B and I had got on very well. When we were transferred back to the main building they turned into monsters. I asked them what they thought the problem was.

‘You were a better teacher then,’ a spokesboy said.

‘We were the senior boys there. Here, we’re junior.’

‘Yus, the big kids bully us.’

Yus, I could’ve told them, and the headmaster bullies junior staff, and the staff bully the big kids, and the big kids bully the littler kids, and you kids play silly buggers with me, a soft target now I don’t belt your arses with a slipper.

A school is an ecosystem. It’s not just a matter of individual good teachers or bad teachers, good students or bad students, it’s the way the system works as a whole that’s most important. And our slaphappy little system down at the annex worked a lot better than the dysfunctional mess up at the main school, where the headmaster was strongly disliked and staff morale was low. And when we were transferred into the latter system, our own working system broke down. The kids were the same, I was the same, yet we all behaved differently. Thinking about education as a system later became central to my educational theory; here I was doing the groundwork the hard way.

Bottom up, as it were.

Her Majesty’s Ministry of Education had a curious but convenient regulation for unqualified teachers like me who possessed a university degree. If the teaching of these people was deemed ‘satisfactory’ by their headmaster, they were regarded as equivalent to having a formal teaching qualification. To my pleased surprise, given many incidents that I thought would have suggested otherwise, my headmaster made that recommendation. Accordingly, I was officially recognized as a qualified teacher. As it happened, that recognition by HM’s Ministry turned out to be crucial in my

appointment as Professor of Education at the University of Newcastle fourteen years later.

But if anyone had told me that, as I walked through the door of Challney School for the last time on 29th March 1958, I would have said:

‘Cor mate, you’re bonkers. Stark raving.’

Chapter 4

From Practice to Theory:

The National Foundation for Educational Research and the University of London

Soon after settling in at Challney, I started making enquiries about doing a PhD. I wrote to Sir Frederick Bartlett at Cambridge University under whom Jim Cardno had studied. I enclosed a letter of introduction Cardno had written and asked if I could have an interview with Bartlett about possible study at Cambridge. We arranged a time, but when I arrived Bartlett's secretary told me he had suddenly taken ill and couldn't see me. He would write to me later and arrange another time.

I never did meet him, but he did write back telling me that he'd heard that the new Director of the National Foundation for Educational Research, a young man called Dr. W. D. Wall, was looking for research staff. If I were appointed to a post there, perhaps I could enrol in the doctoral programme at Birkbeck College, a college of the University of London that specialised in part-time study. 'I shall write to young Wall, indeed I shall. I suggest you do the same.'

So I wrote to young Wall. Yes, he replied, he was advertising for three Assistant Research Officers. Perhaps I could come to London for an interview?

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) occupied a lovely old Regency house at 79 Wimpole Street, right in the heart of London's West End. NFER conducted research into educational issues as required by a governing board, disseminated the results of research, developed tests including those for the life-changing Eleven Plus Exam, and sold educational materials and tests.

In December 1957, I found myself walking down Oxford Street and thence into Wimpole Street, parallel to Harley Street. What a place to work, I thought, if I could be so lucky.

Dr Wall was short, nuggetty and genial. He had a large face and high forehead crowned with black hair. He sucked an elaborate meerschaum pipe. He might have been young to Bartlett, but he certainly appeared old to me, well into his forties.

Wall explained that the appointees were to initiate projects in one of three areas: the teaching of arithmetic, the teaching of reading, and technical education. What post would I be interested in? Did I have any ideas about research in any of these areas?

It had to be arithmetic: I knew less than nothing about the other areas. Then the questions: Did I have any ideas about how the teaching of arithmetic might be improved? How would I go about constructing an arithmetic test for junior secondary school? Would I mind travelling to different parts of England and Wales if required?

Only the last I could answer with confidence. 'No, I wouldn't mind. As I'm here as a part-time tourist, I'd love to travel.'

'Come to beautiful Bolton,' a po-faced man sucking a pipe murmured. I learned later this was Freddie Yates, a man of dry wit, and much respected on the educational scene.

I must have said something right, or maybe there were only three applicants for the three posts. Anyway, I was offered a job at £100 a year more than I was getting as a teacher.

Wall also mentioned enrolling at Birkbeck College; I could work out a thesis topic from the research I would be doing at NFER. Out came another letter of introduction with which Cardno had supplied me: this one to C.A. Mace, Professor of Psychology at Birkbeck. Everything fell into place. That's how careers were established in those days.

My heart goes out to those who have to do it tough in these neoliberal times.

At that time, there was a lot of innovation going on in British primary schools in the teaching of arithmetic: activity methods, Stern blocks, Cuisenaire rods, Unifix blocks, the Bass number-line, and lots of home-made stuff. The question: Did any of this work better than traditional methods of teaching? But what does 'work better' mean? Calculate more rapidly and accurately? Think mathematically, whatever that might mean? Like arithmetic better, be less afraid of it? Maybe some methods 'work better' with bright kids, others with dumb kids. Good questions, all needing answers.

Teachers talked about 'teaching for understanding', but what that meant was unclear: we can understand something at so many different levels. A theory was needed to help define what understanding meant but the most developed theory of learning

arithmetic was based on behaviourism, which emphasised repetition, reward and punishment. This might work for mechanical arithmetic: drill the kids and give them a nice animal stamp or a sweetie if they get it right and if they get wrong you either ignore it or deface their work with a red cross and/or a slippering, depending on whether you listen to Skinner or to Thorndike.

Progressive teachers however were interested in more than just getting it right, but in instilling interest and this thing called understanding. There was little theory to guide them on this, apart from intuition and personal experience. Theory and practice were different languages, as I had found when teaching at Challney school. So in line with my career theme of applying psychology to education top down, I decided I would derive from psychological first principles a theory of learning from which one could make more enlightened teaching decisions. Years later, I realised that this was the wrong way round; theories of teaching are derived inductively, bottom up, not deductively, top down.

The NFER library had recently acquired *The Child's Conception of Number* by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. It seemed to be just what I was looking for. Essentially, Piaget was saying that children's idea of number develops through stages, the earliest stages are 'pre-operational': what they see dominates what they think. Although they may be able to go through the motions of counting, they would say that this line of sweets:

@ @ @ @ @

contains 'more' sweets than this line:

@ @ @ @ @

The first line looks longer so young children think it contains more sweets.

But if the number 'five' changes meaning according to the way it looks, you can't do sums. The four rules of number – addition, subtraction, multiplication and division – only work if numbers remain constant. It shouldn't matter what you are adding or multiplying, or how they look, five is five and not four or six. Therefore children shouldn't be taught even simple computations until their thinking is 'operational', as Piaget called it. That is, they need to be mature enough to see that 'five' is a constant number of objects, no matter how they look or what the objects are.

Now this is more like what ‘understanding’ might mean, as far as arithmetic is concerned.

In the English educational system at that time, children started school at age five, still ‘pre-operational’ according to Piaget. It therefore followed that children shouldn’t be taught the rules of formal arithmetic until they were six or seven. Meantime, they might be given ‘pre-readiness’ games in order to lay the foundations for deeper understanding later on.

This was the teaching strategy in many progressive infant and primary schools, and here was the theory to justify it. As for empirical support, children in Scandinavian schools at that time didn’t do any formal schooling until age seven, yet within a year they were performing as well as or better than British children

It all seemed to fall into place.

Wall had founded a new journal, *Educational Research*, with the Information Officer, David Bell, as co-editor. The journal was very successful because by Volume 3 David Bell was listed as D. Wilson Bell. Wall thought so highly of D. Wilson Bell that he secretly gave him a rise of £100, hiding the amount by adding it to the salary of a junior in Bell’s office. But it became public, as these things tend to do. The usually unflappable Freddie Yates flushed pink with anger. A rather lively exchange occurred.

‘That’s fine,’ Wall smoothly assured us, ‘you’ll all get a rise: I’ll put it to the next meeting of the Board.’

Wall considered it a weakness to prepare for meetings, preferring to rely instead on his (shocking) memory and his (astonishing) power of ad libbing. At the next meeting of the NFER Board, as we learned from an insider, Wall was asked what our current salaries were (£700 – £750 in annual increments of £25). Wall replied: ‘£700 – £800 in increments of £50.’

‘God, that’s not enough!’ one Board member exclaimed. So the Board passed a salary rise for us: £750 – £850 in £50 increments.

But we had to work for it. We were required to write articles for Wall’s new journal. My first article was an annotated bibliography on arithmetic teaching, the fruits of my search of the research literature. In the second, I elaborated Piaget’s theory with implications for teaching by advocating the notion of ‘number readiness’, which neatly

paralleled the already widely accepted notion of ‘reading readiness’.¹⁹ Progressive teachers jumped at the idea.

My Piaget article was a boost to a very junior career.

I also had a PhD to do. I chose a topic that could be incorporated in the NFER research: kids’ emotional reactions to arithmetic, or ‘number anxiety’. So I obeyed my boss yet again and wrote an article on number anxiety.²⁰ This attracted a different kind of attention: ‘It doesn’t add up, Mr. Biggs!’ wrote columnist Jon Akass in *The Daily Herald*.²¹ Peter Simple in his column of daily spleen in *The Daily Telegraph* also mentioned my article and made some of his trademark disparaging comments.

I didn’t care what they said: *my name was in the London papers!*

These articles led to invitations to address conferences and teachers’ groups. Wall and Yates went to Lincoln to sell participation in our research programmes to a group of head teachers, and they took me along for the ride in a First Class Pullman train. At least I thought I was just going along for the ride. But halfway through the meeting, Wall announced that Mr. Biggs would tell them about the arithmetic research. *What?* We hadn’t even finalised the programme. I hadn’t the faintest idea what to say. I gibbered and stammered my way through, not knowing what I was saying. I was silent on the way home in the train, seriously debating with myself whether or not to hand in my resignation. My misery must have been apparent. Next day, Wall and Yates, each seemingly independent of the other, had something nice to say about my part in the meeting. I think they’d conferred and agreed that therapeutic action was seriously called for. I decided that from then on I would write out my talks in full and read and reread them until I knew the script well enough to appear to be talking off the top of my head.

But Wall had worse in store. He insisted that I give a paper on NFER’s arithmetic research at a conference in Morlanwelz, Belgium – in *French*. My school

¹⁹ The teaching of mathematics, Part 1: The development of number concepts in children. *Educational Research*, 1 (2), 17-34, 1959. It was a neat argument but we now know that doing number operations with abstract figures on a page does not mean a child is not yet ready to work out how in practice to share sweets with her friends. Such was Piaget’s god-like status, this pretty obvious realisation was a long time in coming, like twenty more years.

²⁰ The teaching of mathematics, Part 2: Attitudes to arithmetic - Number anxiety. *Educational Research*, 1, (3), 6-21, 1959.

²¹ *Daily Herald*, June 24, 1959. Akass thought I was saying that children who dislike arithmetic are emotionally unstable. I wasn’t saying that at all, but never mind, bad publicity is better than no publicity.

French was very basic and had included little oral French. Reading the paper in French was like one of those impotent nightmare experiences, such as driving a car when blindfolded, a frequent source of night terror for me. I didn't know if the audience had understood me or not. Certainly, I hadn't understood the other papers. At dinner, I asked a man sitting next to me: *'Mon papier, est-ce qu'il était compréhensible?'*

'Mais, oui. Très compréhensible.'

But he winked at the man opposite as he spoke, who sniggered back.

I imposed another condition when giving future talks: they would not only be scripted but in mother tongue.

Another presentation was at a conference for Welsh teachers at Swansea about the Piaget stuff and implications for teaching. I met a Professor Gittins, who was on the NFER Board, and a young educational psychologist called Phillip Williams. Fifty years afterwards, Phillip, by now a long established friend, told me that Gittins was thinking of offering me a lectureship in his Department at Swansea after he'd heard my presentation.

That was good to know eventually, but at the time this conference gave my self-esteem a different whack. A colleague who was attending the conference kindly told me that several mystified teachers had asked her: *'How old is Mr. Biggs?'* (I was 24 but didn't look anything like it). Understandably, many teachers resent research workers telling them how to teach, especially by those who have obviously had little or no teaching experience. Given my colleague's message, I thought I'd better ask the chairman of my session to mention that I had indeed had some teaching experience. He did, enthusiastically referring to my *'years and years of experience in applying his ideas to the teaching of number.'*

The sniggers said it all: Pull the other one, boyo.

On another occasion I visited a school that was using a method of teaching invented by a retired engineer called William Bass. His son had failed maths at university and his father blamed poor teaching in primary school so he invented a method of teaching number. A line was painted on the floor of the classroom, marked off from -20 through 0 to +20. Adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing were all carried by the kids marching up and down the line, or jumping two, three or four steps at a time in the case of the last two operations. Because they'd step or jump either side

of zero, the kids were dealing with negative numbers right from the start, and they could see how adding and multiplying were much the same kind of operation, the only difference was that of direction: multiplying became ‘adding in jumps’ and dividing ‘subtracting in jumps’. But what impressed me most was when Bass introduced me to the headmaster, adding: ‘...and have you *ever* seen *anything* quite so *young*?’

Thanks Mr. Bass, just what I needed.

I confided my worries to Wall, who bared his teeth in a cultured laugh. ‘When William Pitt was Prime Minister at the age of 23, he was sneered at by an older MP on the other side of the House. Pitt replied, “The Honourable Member might note that time alone will cure my problem, but it will not, alas, cure that of the Honourable Member.”’

That I could relate to. Like Pitt, an impediment early in my career was to become an advantage.

The brightest and nicest guy at NFER was the fearless, straight-talking Douglas Pidgeon. He and Yates were a well-known team working from left corner to counter the ideas on intelligence testing from the right corner. Sir Cyril Burt, who had a tremendous influence on British psychology in the pre- and immediate post-war period, claimed, quoting data on identical twins that we now know he fudged, that intelligence tests mostly measured a child’s innate ability. Therefore, he argued, children should be allocated to different types of school – grammar, technical or secondary modern – according to their ability, based on their test performance on the Eleven Plus exam, a procedure that was duly enacted in the 1944 Butler Act. All school children sat for the Eleven Plus Exam at the end of primary school. Roughly 70 per cent of the cohort leaving primary school were deemed ‘failures’ and sent to a secondary modern school, like Challney where I had taught, to complete only four years of secondary education. Grammar and some technical children could go on to A Levels, and thence to university. The argument was that the Eleven Plus gave access to grammar school and university to bright working class children who wouldn’t have had a hope of such an education otherwise. While this was partly true, it also prevented a large majority of children from ever experiencing further education, which greatly exacerbated class divisions in the United Kingdom.

Burt's views on intelligence testing led to his 'pint-pot' theory of over- and under-achievement. You give an intelligence test to find out children's 'capacity'. You then give an attainment test, arithmetic say, and find those whose arithmetic performance doesn't match up to what their intelligence would suggest. These children are 'under-achievers'; they need coaching to bring them up to speed. 'Over-achievers' are those who perform higher than their level of intelligence theoretically should allow; these children are rare, Burt said, and need to be treated carefully. As they are already working to their maximum, coaching could even be damaging.

Sound reasonable? Pidgeon and Yates said it was a load of old cobblers'. Forget the tests' names, intelligence and arithmetic, call them Test A and Test B that correlate at a reasonable level. You will find, as someone as statistically sophisticated as Sir Cyril Burt should well know, that as many kids will perform better than expected on Test B on the basis of its correlation with Test A, as will perform worse on Test B. And in that case, you give remediation to all kids not doing well in arithmetic, not just to some who happen to do well on another test.²²

Burt was furious when Pidgeon and Yates published their paper. He rang up the NFER and asked to speak to Mr. Pidgeon.

Julie, the girl who manned the switchboard, and a low scorer on Test A, asked: 'And 'oo might I say is speakin'?''

'Tell him it's Burt, here.'

'Bert 'oo?'

'Just *Burt*,' the great man said testily.

She rang through to Pidgeon, leaving the line open: 'Mr. Pidgeon, a funny old codger called Bert wants to speak to you. Wouldn't give 'is uvver name. Shall I put 'im froo?''

Zed Dienes was a Hungarian-born mathematician at the University of Leicester who had invented a way of teaching mathematics by using blocks and other concrete representations of quantity, on the basis of a variability principle. He argued that if children were fully to understand our decimal number system they also needed to learn

²² I'm unable to find Pidgeon and Yates' original article but the issue is discussed by P.E. Vernon in 'A new look at intelligence testing', *Educational Research*, 1, 3-12, 1958.

other number systems, according to his variability principle. He had algebra materials based on the same principle. NFER was interested in marketing his materials and part of my job was to research their effectiveness.

I went to Leicester to investigate. My first visit was to a secondary modern school, for students who had been rejected from an academic grammar school education. The teacher of a Form 1 (Year 7) class announced the period: 'Algebra'. At which, to my astonishment, a loud cheer went up. The kids excitedly grouped themselves around tables in fours and pulled out Dienes's Algebraic Experience Materials (AEM). I went to a table.

An eleven-year-old girl explained how they were going to factorise a quadratic expression. She wrote down $2x^2 + 3x + 1$. She explained: 'x can mean any number. Like this strip is x inches long, I don't know how many that is.' She picked up a strip of plastic from the box of AEM materials.

'Doesn't matter, see,' someone else said.

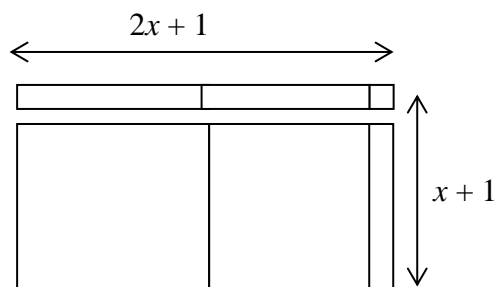
'So x^2 is like a square with sides x inches long, now, innit? Like this 'ere, see?' She picked up a plastic square and put the strip alongside it to show it was indeed a square of side x.

A ginger haired boy butted in. 'Yus, so $2x^2$ is two of these things.' He laid out two squares on the table, butted against each other.

The girl regained her territory. 'And $3x$ is three strips,' she took two more out of the box, 'and 1 is one little square the width of the strip. Now we've got all the bits. You gotta make a rectangle out uv this lot, like it's factors.'

'That's a multiply,' the ginger boy explained to half-witted me.

They formed a rectangle with the pieces:



'So there you are. The factors of $2x^2 + 3x + 1$ are $(2x + 1)$ multiplied by $(x + 1)$.'

‘Obvious, innit?’

I played nasty. ‘What about the factors of $2x^2 + 4x + 1$?’

They pulled an extra strip from the box. They couldn’t make a rectangle using that with all the rest.

‘Can’t do them.’

‘We haven’t done them yet.’

I asked Dienes about that. He shouted with laughter, as was his wont. ‘Oh, that’s simple. You complete the square.’

I remembered that term from Sixth Form – without the plastic – but didn’t he mean ‘complete the rectangle’? Anyway, he solved that by adding strips and units until he could form a rectangle, and then took the same amount of material away.

Some Leicester primary schools also used Dienes’ Multibase Arithmetic Blocks (MAB). These were three-dimensional representations of units, ‘longs’ (strips), ‘flats’ (squares) and ‘blocks’, the longs, flats and blocks being scored with a line that denoted the number of units in each. Three-blocks were scored in threes to represent a three-number system, five-blocks in fives for a five-number system, and so on for seven-blocks and ten-blocks. Ten-blocks represented our decimal number system: a unit was 1, a long was 10, a flat was 10×10 , that is 100, and a block was $10 \times 10 \times 10$, or 1,000.

Dienes was using his principle of variability: we learn concepts by abstracting from a variety of examples. To really understand something, you need to experience varying examples of it in different applications. The Japanese have a saying ‘The fish is the last to discover water’, which means much the same thing. Dienes argued that children won’t properly understand our decimal system unless they experience non-decimal systems. Hopefully they may then more easily generalise from the idea of a base, to that of the power to which the base is raised, to the ideas underlying calculus.

Another well-established principle is that children learn more effectively from doing than from being told. So you don’t tell them how to shuffle the symbols around to factorise a quadratic (as I had been taught), you make a physical model of it – several models in fact (variability) – which enables children to do the maths by acting directly.

A sample of Leicestershire schools using the Dienes materials was added to the sample of the 82 schools already signed up for the arithmetic project. The schools were

categorized as ‘traditional’ methods, which emphasized tables and calculation; ‘structural’ methods, which used blocks and systematic concrete representations of number (of which the Dienes materials were a special case); and ‘motivational’ methods, which were based on activity and interest.

But how to conceptualize these different categories? Mechanical arithmetic was usually seen as a matter of rule-following and memorizing, which behaviourism could handle as repetition and reward. Problem solving, on the other hand, was about insight and understanding, which was much more difficult to handle in terms of existing theory. Max Wertheimer referred to the latter as quite separate processes; he called repetition and memorization a γ process and understanding and nonroutine problem solving an α process.²³ Using this framework, I used behaviourism to conceptualize γ processes; and Piaget, gestalt psychology and Dienes’s variability principle to conceptualize α processes. But it was a dog’s breakfast. I wanted to explain all mathematical thought in terms of a single unifying theory, not in terms of these incompatible theories, but such a single theory was nowhere in sight.

The actual results of the NFER research were disappointing, not what I had hoped for and expected. Traditional methods produced the best results overall. However, very bright children did best using sets of blocks like Cuisenaire, not the slow learners as Cuisenaire-users were claiming. Children taught in informal schools not using structured concrete materials did worst, although they liked arithmetic more than most others.

But the most interesting finding was on the Dienes materials. When compared with closely matched traditionally-taught, Dienes-taught children performed exceptionally well in all aspects; the longer they had been working with the Dienes materials, the stronger the effect. To my surprise, Dienes-taught children way outshone traditionally taught in *mechanical* arithmetic, supposedly best taught by traditional drilling and table chanting. The reason was that in adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing, Dienes-taught kids worked out what they were doing, even the slow learners. They didn’t need to remember their tables and number facts. Playing around with the flats and longs and blocks of different bases had ‘explained’ it all to them. In other

²³ Wertheimer, M. (1945) *Productive thinking*, New York: Harper.

words, what I had called a γ process had become for most children taught by the Dienes method an α process.

I wrote a report for NFER on the efficacy of different methods and under what conditions.²⁴ As I write now, it strikes me how prescient was the title, although I hadn't thought so at the time: *Mathematics and the conditions of learning*. Although a book about teaching methods, the title was about learning.

As Thomas Shuell, later said, '... what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does.'²⁵ Which seems pretty obvious at first glance, but it turns our usual conception of teaching on its head. It took me many years to get my head properly around that challenging notion (see Chapter 13).

Birkbeck College was a college of the University of London that specially catered for students in the workforce. Professor C.A. Mace was head of the Psychology Department. We postgraduate students were allocated a supervisor and required to attend a seminar at least once each term. There was also an annual social gathering. At one such, I was astounded to see Professor Mace in drag: there he was, his kind, craggy face under grey locks, smoking his characteristic pipe, and dressed in a flowing floral frock. I looked again, and saw two Professor Maces, one in the frock and another in a grey suit, each smoking a pipe. The person I had originally seen was his wife. How couples may grow alike over the years!

At our first seminar, Mace told us his expectations for a doctoral thesis: as brief as clarity and necessary detail allow, and roughly in the region of 100 pages. My topic was on the conditions under which children developed number anxiety and how it affected their mathematical performance. I saw my supervisor, Brian Foss, only once or twice a year: he suggested, rightly, that at NFER I would have all the technical support and advice on methodology and data analysis that I would need, so his role was to generally oversee my writing up. But contrary to the departmental norm, I had quantitative ideas of what a thesis should be: it ended up as 440 single-spaced pages. When the examiners finally passed it, Mace wrote a note of congratulation, adding a

²⁴ *Mathematics and the conditions of learning*, London: National Foundation for Educational Research, 1967.

²⁵ Shuell, T. (1986). Cognitive conceptions of learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 56, 411- 36.

well-deserved but gentle censure to the effect that I had not adhered to *his* thesis: a thesis should be around 100 double-spaced pages.

If I had had a mentor during my PhD years, it would have been Bill Wall. This is no criticism of anyone at Birkbeck College, but the fact was that I was working full time at NFER, and Wall, with all his eccentricities, had provided me with professional opportunities for which I am profoundly grateful. I was delighted, therefore, to have been invited in 2002 by the Education Section of the British Psychological Society to give the Annual Vernon-Wall Memorial Lecture (see p. XXX), and able to acknowledge how Wall had set me on my feet at the start of my professional journey.

In 1961, I married Ruth Dienes, Zed Dienes's oldest daughter, whom I had met during my visits to Leicester. Zed himself had accepted a readership in psychology at the University of Adelaide, and as I was keen to return to Australia, he suggested that I apply for a lectureship in the same department, and we would all be one big happy family. But of course I would have to apply through the proper channels, which I did. The head of the Psychology Department, Malcolm Jeeves, offered me a post but with strings attached – principally, that I take up the post within months, if necessary before my PhD was through. I needed the whole of 1962 to complete my writing up and wanted to do that within access of all my data. Zed urged me not to let this chance go by and to finish my PhD in Australia if necessary. Then Jeeves told me if I wasn't there by February 1962 the deal was off.

I was becoming increasingly unhappy about being a creature of the Dienes family, for good reason as it turned out, so when a Professor Jim Richardson of the University of New England wrote out of the blue suggesting I might be interested in a senior lectureship in his new Department of Education, I was delighted, not say stunned. He had written to Wall about staffing and Wall had suggested me, not reining in his tendency to exaggerate. I wrote back to Richardson, saying that I was interested but in the more modest post of lecturer, as he would understand after reading my CV.

The offer from UNE was better than the Adelaide in all respects, except that it was not in a psychology department. Zed insisted that psychology was more prestigious than education; one could always move from psychology to education but not from education to psychology – I later proved him twice wrong on that. Wall said something

that made better sense: professional recognition depends on who you are and what you do, not where you are.

I accepted the post at the University of New England.

Chapter 5

A University of a Military Kind: The University of New England

Originally established in 1938 as a university college of the University of Sydney in the small city of Armidale in rural New South Wales, the University of New England became fully independent as a university in its own right in 1954. I arrived nine years later to find an intriguing mix: a *faux* Oxford rubbing shoulders with dinky-di rural Australia. Students wandered the campus in mandatory green undergraduate gowns over shorts and thongs and they lived in residential colleges where college fellows dined at high table. The campus was on the outskirts of the business centre for the surrounding prime agricultural country on the rolling New England Tablelands. Armidale was locally known as ‘the Athens of the North’, for as well as the University of New England the city also contained a teachers’ college and two elite private schools. Locals claimed that Armidale had the highest average IQ of any city in the world, but that proud claim that did not alas apply during vacation.²⁶

The university’s administration was housed in the magnificent Booloominbah, once a huge architect-designed country homestead, around which were scattered less inspiring demountable huts that were gradually giving way to more modern buildings, including on site residential colleges. From within the magnificence of their heritage mansion, the university’s administration ran things by the book. On appointment, I was awarded a £300 baggage allowance and first-class travel from England to Armidale. Our removal expenses came to £400. I priced one-class passages, which were cheaper by much more than that £100 difference. I wrote to the University asking them to let Ruth and I travel one-class, put £100 towards the removal expenses and they can keep the change. We’d all be ahead. Can’t be done was the reply: the travel regulations say

²⁶ 60s Armidale and UNE is painted by Robert Barnard in his thriller, *Death of an Old Goat*, Collins, 1977; Penguin, 1983. Bob was in the English Department while I was at UNE. I instantly recognized his portraits of ‘Drummondale’, as Armidale, of UNE and of some of its inhabitants. UNE of the early 50s is painted in Mulaika Corben’s *Not to Mention the Kangaroos*, London: Hammond & Hammond, 1956.

first-class, first-class it must be. We had a lively exchange of letters. The University wouldn't budge on first-class but they increased the baggage allowance to £400. So we travelled first-class, me with startled insights into the workings of the bureaucratic mind. They were as nothing to the insights I gained subsequently in my academic career.

After a pleasant voyage, rather spoiled by the formality of travelling first-class, which *inter alia* entailed me wearing a dinner jacket for evening dinner and Ruth ringing the changes on formal dresses and costume jewellery so that she seemed to appear newly kitted for each dinner. After docking in Sydney, we went straight to Central Station where I bought two second-class tickets to Armidale. The train took over twelve hours for the 300 odd miles; heating was by means of a huge metal bottle under the seat, filled originally with hot water. It was stone cold by the time we arrived in Armidale, high in the New England Range, early in the morning.

Professor Richardson had said he would meet us, but when we arrived the platform was empty. Looking around, we saw a man at the exit about to leave, looking unhappy. It was Professor Richardson. He had, of course, been expecting us to alight from the first-class carriage and understandably thought he that he had missed us – for we had alighted, of course, from a second class carriage.

We shook hands. He was thickset, with a large, round face, high cheekbones, and a chuckly North Country voice. We hadn't had breakfast so he took us to his home, where we met his wife and his daughter.

A pleasant start but things soured from then on. The agenda at my first departmental meeting was to decide the staffing of the various sections of the Diploma of Education. I wasn't too happy to find myself teaching statistics and research methods almost exclusively. I thought I had been employed to teach the learning and developmental sections but they had been allocated to existing staff before I had arrived.

One unit was left: 'Speech Difficulties', which was compulsory for all students. Eric Pearson from Armidale Teachers' College was present. I'd already met Eric at Birkbeck College where he too had done his PhD. Eric was tall and gaunt, he grimaced as he tortured each vowel into a drawn-out triphthong in classic outback Australian.

'Well, who'll take Speech Difficulties?' Jim rapped out, Jim style.

Silence. Who'd want to take that?

Eric finally broke the silence. 'We-e-ell, er, Jim uh, I'll er – take – the, uh, course – on, uh, Speech er Difficulteees!'

I couldn't suppress an uncollegial guffaw.

'Oh,' Jim glared balefully, 'I see Mister Biggs thinks it funny the way I run this meeting!'

Oh dear.

But I really blew it at the end of the year. I was not happy about my teaching allocation. I was sharing my unhappiness with Doug Savage, a young lecturer in psychology, who said he was resigning to go back to England (he later returned to Murdoch in WA) as a result of which a post in learning and development, and a Fellowship of Robb College, one of the male student residences, would fall vacant. Doug strongly recommended that I apply for both positions, the latter being rent-free. I, with debt a continuing burden on my recently married shoulders, thought this would be a great idea.

I spoke to Duncan Howie, the genial Professor of Psychology. He encouraged me to apply for the lectureship. I said I would, but if I was appointed, I'd want in fairness to Jim Richardson to serve one full year in Education. Duncan agreed to that, if I were successful. So with that condition, I applied.

In December, just before Christmas, the Selection Committee met. I was pleased that Professor Richardson was on it, as he could put his Department's case – and he had that promise of a year's service.

Next morning, there was a note in my pigeon-hole.

Mister Biggs. My congratulations. You have been appointed to the lectureship in psychology. This will take effect as from tomorrow.

Sgd. (Professor) J. Richardson

In the remaining four years we shared at UNE, he didn't speak to me again.²⁷

²⁷ We met at a conference in Hobart, around 1976. He shook my hand and said he had been too hasty in his judgment of me. In retrospect, he thought what I had done was understandable as a career move. He died not long after that. Jim was a better person than he pretended to be.

UNE was a university of a military kind. Brigadier Madgwick was the Vice-Chancellor, the Masters of three of the resident Colleges were run by Lieutenant-Colonels Meredith, Treloar and Swinney. My future colleague, the silver-headed Major Barratt from the Psychology Department, was Esquire Bedell of the University, which meant he headed university processions bearing aloft a bloody great big ornamental mace. Major Denis Bloodnok of the highly esteemed Goon Show would have felt at home at the University of New England.

Students lived in segregated residential colleges. They were required to wear a green undergraduate gown during lectures and for dinner at night. On upper left lapel of such gown, green in colour, a bar, brass and of high polish, was to be pinned thereon, one such bar for each undergraduate year successfully passed. One girl, who had arrived for a psychology lecture gownless, was ordered from the lecture theatre by an outraged Major Barratt. She fled weeping. Major Barratt continued his lecture, grimly satisfied with a Job Well Done. Academic staff were also required to wear their academic gown during lectures but I don't recall that any were court martialled for not so doing. I certainly didn't wear mine all the time.

The Master of Robb College, Ben Meredith, had a fine military record. He was one of the Rats of Tobruk, in which campaign he had lost an arm. He kept the armless sleeve of his quality Harris tweed jacket tucked neatly into the side pocket. Ben had a bluff Jack Hawkins face, spoke in a bluff, tweedy, county accent – he came from Melbourne you see – and was a fine horseman. He used to gallop from his home across the paddocks to his office at Robb.

Following Doug Savage's advice, I offered myself for that post as Fellow of Robb College and was appointed. Ruth and I were delighted with our new flat. It was on the ground floor at a corner nearest the University, with nice views across to Lake Zot and the hills, the University hidden amongst the trees. As to the moral tutorship that went with being a Fellow, I had a group of about a dozen male students to whom I was to give moral tuition, whatever that meant.

One of the duties of a Fellow of Robb College was to dine, gowned, at High Table at least twice a week for Formal Dinner. Prior to this serious event we went to the Fellows' Common Room, where we engaged in sophisticated Fellowly conversation while sipping bulk dry sherry from tiny glasses.

As for that moral tutorship, I was to invite each of my tutees to see them individually in my study for an improving chat on a regular basis. It frequently went something like this: 'Getting on well are we? No problems? Good, good. Now shove off and tell the next bloke to come in, there's a good chap.' Once a term, they were to be invited to dinner.

As it turned out, there was rather more to being a moral tutor than that. The colleges had rigid visiting regulations. No girls were to be allowed in boys' rooms and *vice versa*. There were small common rooms at each corner of each floor, with a floor to ceiling glass wall, where girl friends were visible and there they were allowed to sit with their boyfriends until ten o'clock at night. After that, if students wanted privacy with their girlfriends, they had to find a large gum tree to hide behind. However, temperatures of 17° Fahrenheit, that is fifteen degrees below freezing, were a distinct possibility in an Armidale winter, so their enthusiasm for doing what comes naturally had to be more than remarkable.

Another duty of the moral tutor was therefore to patrol the floors at night, clear the common rooms of what the clock had now defined as sluts, and to call in on your moral tutees for a friendly chat, which being interpreted meant to check that they weren't sheltering females, whether for immoral purposes or any other. Sheltering males was evidently okay, for whatever purpose.

At a Fellows' meeting early in my tenure, I asked Ben what I was supposed to do if I did indeed find a couple '*in flagrante delicto*', as with learned delicacy I put it.

Ben flushed. 'Wouldn't happen, old man. Just wouldn't happen.'

Then what, I asked silently, was the bloody point of patrolling the corridors in the dead of night?

No point, so thereafter I didn't.

One morning, soon after breakfast, Ben's secretary rang me.

'Ben wants you in his office. Now, John, if that's convenient. Trouble with Nigel Fisher, one of your tutees,' she explained.

'Tell him I'll be right over, Cherry.'

Nigel Fisher ... ah yes, that name was on my list of tutees. Hadn't got around to seeing him yet. So that's what Ben wants to see me about, I thought. Fair crack of the whip, I've only been here a couple of months!

I presented myself at Ben's office. Ben was sitting behind his desk, looking magisterial. He waved me to a chair. Across from me was a good looking lad with black, curly hair.

'Hello, Nigel,' I said quickly, as if I knew him of old.

But no, it's not me in the firing line, but Nigel. It appeared he had been a trifle naughty. Ben began the cross-examination. His technique was to fire questions so that Nigel himself would tell me the extent of his naughtiness. He unfolded the story reluctantly. Last Friday, he got up late. He went to the refectory for breakfast just as one of the kitchen staff, a middle-aged woman, was closing the grille over the service counter. She told him he was too late for breakfast.

'And what did you tell her, Nigel?' Ben asked gently, but his eyes were brilliant gimlets.

'I told her ... I told her ...'

'Yes, Nigel?'

'I told her ... to get stuffed!' Nigel's eyes were moistening.

Ben looked at me significantly. 'And then what did you do, Nigel?'

'I, er, I reached over and grabbed a plate of cereal.'

'And then?'

'And then, oh, I ate it!'

'You ate it. *Now Fisher,*' Ben rapped out, leaning forward, the steel in his voice finally unsheathed, the gimlets boring into Nigel, 'what would you think of some young lout who told your mother to "Get stuffed"? Eh?'

Mumble.

'Your mother, Fisher, did you hear me? Your mother! Eh? EH?'

Nigel was by now swaying in his chair from side to side, tears streaming down his face, erupting raucous sobs.

Ben smiled grimly. 'Thank you, Nigel. You may go.'

When he'd gone, and I'd swallowed the vomit that was surging up my throat, Ben said, all chummy now: 'Learnt that in the Army. Bring their mothers in. Cracks the

toughest nut. Never fails, old man, never fails. Poor old Nigel, he's a good lad. Comes from a good grazing family, don't you know. But it needed to be done. Needed to be done. Thanks John, that's all.'

I promised myself I'd have my own little chat with Nigel later on, to let him know that I didn't want to be associated with that sort of psychological sadism. But I'd left it too late. Shortly after that, Nigel was dead.

Meningitis.

In June 1963, Ruth gave birth to twin boys, Michael and Paul, who were later to be renamed as Bruce and Zoltan. The rhythm of our family life changed drastically, becoming asynchronous with the ordered rhythm of college life; in short, it wasn't working. I purchased a run-down house and started renovations, both to provide alternative accommodation and to make some sort of financial investment as, despite the rent-free flat, we were still going backwards in that department. I spent nearly three months working on the house, returning to the psychology department for my lectures and the occasional staff meeting. I blush to think of that now, but on those days you could get away with that sort of thing.

My research and writing had been on hold ever since coming to Armidale. With preparing lectures for new courses in my first teaching job, the bizarre demands of moral tutoring, getting up in the night to attend to crying babies, washing nappies and other domestic duties that by default fell to my lot, starring in two musical comedies, and fighting a losing domestic battle, meant that Wall wasn't getting that final report I had to write for NFER; and I wasn't developing that theory of learning that would help teachers teach better.

Arthur Copley joined the Department sometime in 1965. He came from Adelaide, had taught in Germany, had obtained his PhD in Edmonton, Alberta, and thence he was appointed to UNE. Extraverted Arthur couldn't stop talking, whatever the subject, but one he kept reverting to was about his time as a graduate student in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta. Had he stopped talking about it, or never started, I almost certainly wouldn't have gone there four years later. It was from Edmonton where my career as an educational psychologist was really launched.

Arthur drew my attention to a book of readings edited by four Albertans, Harper, Anderson, Christensen and Hunka.²⁸ It opened a new world to me. The then orthodoxy was S-R behaviourism, but even at that time I thought there was so much that behaviourism couldn't explain. For example, Skinner trained rats to press a bar by rewarding them with food. When they received it, they pressed faster. Skinner said they were 'learning'. But the rats were able to press the bar already, they weren't learning anything. But they might have been more *motivated* to press the bar faster. Different. Not what Skinner and the behaviourists were claiming. The behaviourists also said that you can only observe what is physically there. You can't observe mental events; therefore mental events don't exist. You can't see what I am thinking, so my thoughts aren't real. I'd prefer to believe my thoughts are real and that I can tell you about them: I wouldn't be writing this if I didn't believe that.

In that book that Arthur had recommended, there was an article by R. C. Oldfield, another student of F.C. Bartlett, who showed how the qualitative changes in memory Bartlett had written about in 1932, which I had studied in Psych I, could readily be accounted for by a coding mechanism. Bartlett's point was that remembering an event was subject to qualitative changes, not just how much of an event was remembered. We tend to remember not what *had* happened, but what we might reasonably have *expected* to have happened. Behaviourism on the other hand dictated that we learned and forgot in incremental bits, which left no room for expectations.

I thought the coding things that Oldfield was talking about opened up a whole new way of looking at complex learning, thinking and memory. Just what I needed to make sense of my NFER work. I wrote an article on my take on this work on coding, a book, and a paper for the next meeting of the Australian Psychological Society in Melbourne.²⁹ In his Presidential Address, Dick Champion, a rampant behaviourist, took as his theme those sloppy, soft-minded would-be scientific psychologists who talked, quoting from the abstract of my paper, about a black box, in which 'coding' took place,

²⁸ Harper, R.J.C., Anderson, C.C., Christensen, C.M. & Hunka, S. (eds). *The Cognitive Processes: Readings*. Prentice-Hall, 1964.

²⁹ Coding and cognitive behaviour, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 60, 287-305, 1969. *Information and human learning*. Melbourne: Cassell, 1968, Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1971; Stuttgart: Klett, 1974.

ha ha, who did the coding, eh? And who did the coding for the coder? Still another coder? And what's this about, chortle, 'internal events'? Oh please, need I go on?

No, Dick, you needn't. I was glowing like in London days when the *Daily Herald* had trashed my work on number anxiety. The thing was: *I had been noticed by the psychological establishment*. Hey, I thought, maybe Dick was worried; maybe I had 'em on the run! S-R behaviourism was history! S-R behaviourism was indeed history shortly afterwards, but it had do with people like Herbert Simon, George Miller and Karl Pribram.

John Biggs? Nobody had heard of him.

After Duncan Howie's retirement, the next head of department was Aubrey Yates, who prided himself on being a hard-line, tough-minded scientific psychologist. He had little time for the humanists in our department and we had a few: a Rogerian, a Jungian (who was also an amazing magician), and an all-purpose developmental humanist. Then there were the middle of the road psychologists like Arthur and myself, to the tough-minded like Paul Barratt. Paul thought himself the toughest of all of us because he taught brain anatomy using long Latin terminology, which made it very scientific indeed.

The only time I heard Aubrey laugh was when he was giving his Inaugural Lecture when appointed Professor of Psychology. His research was applying behaviour therapy to enuresis and encopresis: pissing the bed and shitting the bed, respectively. The idea was that when a child started to wet the bed, in whatever mode, a circuit was broken and a shock delivered, which woke the child up, who then got up and finished the process in the toilet.

While describing the state of encopresis, Aubrey broke down.

'It was ... oh dear... it was,' giggle, giggle '... the colour... oh dear me...of... *ripe bananas!*' Aubrey had to stop as he grappled with the rich humour of the encopretic situation.

A strange man, whose strangeness exacerbated a domestic problem I was about to encounter.

In those days prior to television, people made their own fun. We partied a lot, tending to cluster within our disciplines: the Arts mob, the Science mob, the Rural

Science mob. Unsurprisingly, in those up close, personal and well lubricated conditions, the marital mortality rate was colossal. The Biggses were included in the 1965 statistics.

Ruth had voiced a need to, as she had put it, 'find out about myself'. This, I was to discover, meant having an affair, inter alia, with Rod McDonald, a senior lecturer in my own department. On the 9 September, I returned home to find the place empty. The boys' cots, bedding, clothes, toys, everything of theirs, was gone.

Suspecting what had happened, I rang up Aubrey at home to let him know the situation and to ask if he knew anything of McDonald's whereabouts. He would only tell me that McDonald had approached him that day to ask for leave 'for personal reasons', and that he would be away for about a week. Aubrey said he had no idea where he was or what he was doing. I told him what he was probably doing but I couldn't enlighten him as to where he was doing it.

In Adelaide, as it turned out. McDonald had driven Ruth and my sons to Zed Dienes's home. When McDonald returned, the atmosphere in the department had become poisonous, but it was *just* livable because McDonald and I didn't talk or otherwise interact with each other.

But then a student, Mez Davis, who I assumed knew nothing of all this, told me that he wanted to do an honours thesis on a topic that would benefit from joint supervision, to wit: 'You and Dr. McDonald.'

'Hold it, Mez, I'll get back to you.'

I had to talk this over with Aubrey, as department head. I went to his office. 'Aubrey, Mez Davis has asked that McDonald and I supervise his honours thesis. You know the circumstances and I'm saying now, I couldn't handle it.'

'You'll do what I think is in the interests of the students.'

I couldn't believe the bloodless bastard. 'Well, I'm saying now that I won't do it.' Possibly my voice rose a fraction.

'I repeat. I'm Head of Department and you shall obey my directions.'

I flipped. 'I'm going to bring the Vice-Chancellor in on this! Get him on the phone.' I reached over, picked up the receiver, holding it out to him.

Fortunately, there was a brief tap on the door and the departmental secretary entered. I put the phone back and left the room. It had got out of hand.

But I didn't supervise Mez.

I searched for jobs. I saw a post of Educational Research Officer advertised at the new Monash University. That could mean anything, but as it was advertised at senior lecturer level I applied, but with a stack of private reservations that I would put on the table if I were short listed.

I was. In June 1966, I was interviewed by Professor Dick Selby Smith, Dean of Education at Monash. He was tall, with distinguished grey hair and large, black Menzian eyebrows. Selby, as he liked to be called, was all smiles and wrinkled agreement.

I gained the impression that the post was to carry out research into anything that might be pertinent to improving teaching and learning at university. Selby told me that a brilliant young man called Don Anderson was doing the same at Melbourne University. Don's line was social psychology, sociology, something like that, so, yes indeed, a cognitive psychologist would be absolutely splendid. I mentioned my coding model of learning suggesting that maybe we could predict student performance by the ways students went about information processing as I pretentiously called learning. Some information processing styles might be better suited to Arts, some to Science. How about that?

'Oh, John,' John already, eh? 'I do believe your ideas would complement Don's work beautifully!' Selby's eyes disappeared as he beamed more wrinkled agreement at me.

A senior lectureship, with what sounds like my own research laboratory. Mind you, it was called an Educational Research *Office*. But what's in a name?

A lot, as it turned out.

Chapter 6

A Career Detour: Monash University

Victoria's second university, Monash University, was established in 1958 as a foil to the staid and stuffy University of Melbourne. Accordingly, in its early years, Monash had the advantage of no entrenched traditional practices. Maybe for this reason, by the late 1960s Monash had a reputation for student activism, becoming the centre for student protest in Australia, particularly against the Vietnam War. A mock crucifixion was held in August 1968, soon after I had arrived, bringing down the wrath of the Melbourne Establishment on the university and particularly on the 'long haired bludgers' that attended it, in the suavely urbane words of Premier Sir Henry Bolte. Sir Louis Matheson, the first Vice-Chancellor, was unfairly blamed for all this mayhem whereas it was quite out of his or anyone's control. Matheson wanted to establish a first-class academic institution, deliberately selecting young, talented staff to fuel the rapid rise of Monash. On the teaching side, as part of his innovative approach, he established the Educational Research Office, with me as the first appointment.

I quickly learned that the job was not what Selby had led me to expect. The Educational Research Office was part of administration: I was not in an academic post but under the Academic Register. I was to do the bidding of the Education Committee, chaired by Vice-Chancellor Matheson, on which were representatives of most faculties. From the first few meetings, it seemed that they really didn't know what they wanted from me except to keep track of student statistics. The problem, I now see, was that they were interested in the output aspect of teaching – student pass rates – while Don Anderson's Educational Research Unit at Melbourne University was looking at the input into teaching: student demographics and matriculation performance. For my part, I was interested – and still am – in the processes of teaching and learning, which is what goes on between input and output. But my Committee evidently weren't interested in that; their interest was in what I later discovered the Americans called 'institutional research', which is short term and specific to the institution.

Smarting under my administrative status, I decided to cement my academic career by applying for an Australian Research Grants Committee (ARGC) grant. I

mentioned this at an early meeting of the Education Committee. Vice-Chancellor Matheson placed his elbows on the table in front of him, his hands clasped, his chin resting on his thumbs, his large dark eyebrows raised. He put it to the committee: 'Well, what do members of the Committee think?'

Professor Don Cochrane, Dean of Economic and Politics, powerbroker extraordinaire and the most to be feared, drawled: 'Why certainly, Vice-Chancellor, as long as he does his research *after* 5 pm.' Wilga Rivers, who had done some good work on the teaching of French, gave me a sympathetic I'd-love-to-help-but-what-can-I-do smile. And so it was agreed that the Educational Research Officer was in a nine-to-five clerical job and that he was not to get any big ideas about being an academic and doing real research.

Just then the Psychology Department advertised a post that would suit me. I talked to Ross Day, the Head of Department. He was encouraging, but of course I had to go through the usual procedures. I gave Aubrey Yates' name as a referee as he was my last head of department. Next thing, Ross called me into his office.

'Sorry, John, but we won't be offering the job to you.' He cleared his throat. 'Can I give you a bit of advice? Just be more careful in future about who you give as a referee.'

Evidently Aubrey hadn't forgiven me for defying his orders to work with McDonald. I didn't explain this to Ross, perhaps I should have, but no point: the appointment had been made and it wasn't me.

Back in my office in administration, I dutifully repeated with Monash students what Don Anderson and his colleague Don Fitzgerald at the Melbourne University Educational Research Unit (why did they have a 'Unit' while I only had an 'Office'?) had been doing on predicting first year results on the basis of various weightings of matriculation subjects. It was actuarial sort of stuff, crunched out by a program Fitzgerald had developed.

I was shocked to find that while correlations between matriculation performance and first year were quite high in science, around .5 to .6, the corresponding figures in arts subjects were no different from zero. Yet students were being selected for the Faculty of Arts on the basis of their matric results! They might as well have been selected on the basis of their height, or the girth of their bellies. How to

improve the selection of students to areas like arts? That was the question I tried to address.

Researchers in the United States were doing work on students' 'study habits', a term I disliked, implying as it did that studying is a mechanical habit, some being good habits, others bad. I used the term 'study behaviours', thinking with the help of my coding model, that some behaviours might be more suitable for studying arts-type subjects, while other behaviours might work better for studying science-type subjects. Might this not solve the problem of the low predictability of arts-type performance?

I didn't need research grants to pursue this line as I had unlimited stationery, an excellent secretary and computing facilities. I collected a lot of self-report questionnaire items on study behaviour that seemed to reflect the ways some students typically operate: their 'cognitive styles', as the buzzword had it. I had the idea that personality/style factors might make some ways of studying more congenial than others, and that some ways of studying suited different subject matter. 'I like studying subjects where there are clear cut answers' is an example of an 'intolerance of ambiguity' style expressed in study behaviour. I would expect arts students to disagree and science students to agree. I put together the *Study Behaviour Questionnaire*, consisting of ten of these scales of several items each, and slipped it into a testing programme for incoming students with demographic and other stuff that the Educational Research Officer might more reasonably be expected to be collecting, pursuant to his obligations. There were differences between faculties on the different scales in the way I expected, but unfortunately, the scales didn't predict academic performance as well as I'd hoped.³⁰ Which, I consoled myself, only goes to show just how complex we human beings are.

I later realised, like thirty years later, that it was the wrong question. You don't start with student personality, but with *teaching*. Teachers can't control a student's personality but they can control how they go about teaching. Anyway, why would we want to predict what students will do well and what ones will do poorly? Good teachers

³⁰ Biggs, J. B. (1970) 'Faculty patterns in study behaviour.' *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 22, 161-174; and 'Personality correlates of some dimensions of study behaviour.' *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 22, 287-297.

want *all* their students to do well, don't they?³¹ So the focus should be on what good teaching is all about. It seems obvious now, but the academic *zeitgeist* sometimes plays tricks with common sense. With that rethink, the original *Study Behaviour Questionnaire* morphed into the now widely used *Study Process Questionnaire*, the dimensions of which, deep and surface approaches to learning, are the outcomes, not the determinants, of teaching.³²

But I had yet to get a passport to take me back to academe proper. I thought I should write a book on that coding model I was currently using to help design the study behaviour questionnaire. To my amazed delight, Cassells Australia was interested in publishing it; it went into North American and German editions.³³

My argument was that while in the 50s and 60s the psychology of learning was all about Skinner, rats and behaviourism, behaviourism couldn't possibly model educational learning, but information processing in limited memory systems could. It was a better fit, but as I was later to conclude, it was still wrong. The educational context has to be the starting point, not theories derived from experiments done in laboratories or with captive first year students as subjects. To make this point, I thought I'd use the term 'educology' (**educ** - ational psych - **ology**).³⁴ However, I found it had been used in other quite different usages that only confused matters, so I didn't use that term again.³⁵

The European Seminar on Learning and Educational Process' (SOLEP) was a month long seminar held in Sweden, sponsored by UNESCO, and young-up-and-coming educational psychologists were invited to apply. The organisation of the seminar was largely American, the Director being John B. Carroll of Educational Testing Service, Princeton.

Incredibly, despite my being in administration, the Educational Research Officer was entitled to study leave – presumably to carry out the research he wasn't supposed to have been doing. So I applied for SOLEP. But who to nominate as referees? My current

³¹ Actually, many teachers *don't* want all students to do well. They want a few to do well, most to do middling well, and a few to do poorly because they think that that is what nature intended; they call it 'the bell curve'. In my view, good teaching destroys the bell curve.

³² Biggs, J. (1999) *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

³³ Biggs, J. B. *Information and human learning*. Melbourne: Cassell, 1968; American edition, Glenview, Ill: Scott, Foresman, 1971; German edition, Stuttgart: Klett, 1974.

³⁴ 'Educology: The theory of educational practice,' *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 1, 274-284, (1976).

³⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Educology>

workplace superiors were unsuitable, so despite Ross Day's warning, I had to go back to Aubrey Yates. I'd like to think that Aubrey had an attack of conscience but on second thoughts I think that unlikely. Whatever, I was accepted.

So, armed with my coding model and drafts of the *Study Behaviour Questionnaire*, I set off for Sweden. The first person I met while waiting at Stockholm Airport for transport to Skepparholmen, an island in the Stockholm archipelago where the seminar was to be held, was a young English woman, Ann Brown, who had just finished her PhD at London University. Ann was, like me, over-awed by the high academic power we perceived was awaiting us. The first meeting that night did nothing to allay those fears. One of the group leaders was Alan Brimer, who had preceded me at NFER and was to do so again at the University of Hong Kong (p. xxxx). Most of the other group leaders were from top US universities and they were awesome: verbally so fluent, up with the very latest, obviously la crème de la crème of academe. On that first night, Ann and I looked at each other asking the same question: What are little fish like us doing here?

Summer nights in Skepparholmen were magical. We conferees sat up talking until sunset – that is about 11 pm – demolishing duty-free eked out with weak Pripps beer until sunrise a couple of hours later. In between, pecking orders had been decisively reshuffled.

One of the stars of the conference was Mats Björkman, who had been in charge of the logistics for changing Swedish traffic from driving on the left side of the road, to the right. It was all done overnight, across the whole of Sweden, months before we arrived – and thanks to Mats's strategy of implementation there were no accidents.³⁶ Mats exemplified the Scandinavian dualism in Ingmar Bergmann's films: whereas 'Smiles of a Summer Night' is sparkling and extraverted, 'The Seventh Seal' is dark, hopeless, a horrifying spiritual winter. Each makes up the two sides of the Swedish kronor. Mats required a bottle of vodka to turn his daily winter into summer. Another star at SOLEP was Mike Wertheimer from Boulder, Colorado. Bright but modest, he suffered from being in his father's shadow, Max Wertheimer, who was one of the greats of Gestalt psychology. Max W's postulating of γ and α processes was relevant to my NFER work.

Mats, Mike, Ann, Marianne Bauer a Swedish researcher, and I celebrated the annual Crayfish Festival on an island, where Marianne had a summer shack. We rowed to

³⁶ Mats used Egon Brunswik's so-called 'lens model', which relates predicted behaviour to a particular context. For more see: Brunswik, E. (1952). The conceptual framework of psychology. *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, Volume 1, Number 10. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

the island, where Marianne resurrected a large jar of pickled crayfish – rather like yabbies – from the cellar. Crayfish are to be accompanied by toast, beer, and akvavit. Every so often, someone stands and shouts ‘*bottons op*’, which means that however much raw spirit is in one’s glass at that time, tradition decrees that it must be downed in one, followed by a beer chaser.

Mats set a punishing pace and it was summer all night long.

Ann and I returned to England on the same flight. She showed me around the Psychology Department at the University of Sussex, where coincidentally my son Zoltan now holds a chair in psychology. She was preparing to go to Connecticut, where she had an appointment as assistant professor; very soon after that, she went to Illinois as a full professor.

Ann became one of the more important cutting-edge educational psychologists in the US. She was President of the American Educational Research Association and she received several major awards for her work on metacognition, children’s reading and special education. SOLEP possibly accelerated that process for her, but there is no doubt she would have made it anyway. SOLEP also helped me along my way but I was nowhere near Ann’s class.

Ann had health problems, and I was deeply saddened to read that in October, 1999, she died, aged only 55.

UCLA Berkeley issued an obituary³⁷, which reads *inter alia*:

Brown’s theories about how children learn, and how they should be taught in the classroom, have spread throughout the world of educational scholarship, primarily because she did what few others have done. She tested her ideas, using rigorous research methods, in the difficult classroom environment.

I also read that Ann was born in an air raid shelter in Portsmouth, England, during World War II, and that she didn’t learn to read until she was 13 years old. Her work on teaching underprivileged children to read was probably her greatest contribution.

After the SOLEP conference, I gave a series of seminars across Canada on my coding model and the study behaviour research, usually for \$50 a pop plus expenses, and sometimes more. I not only made a profit out of the trip, but the thought of other

³⁷ Google: ‘Ann L. Brown’

academics taking me seriously enough to pay to hear my ideas was heady stuff to someone who was seen by his superiors as a marginalised clerk in administration. That trip opened the exit door from Monash.

Arthur Cropley was now a Professor of Psychology at the University of Saskatchewan at Regina. I was rapidly coming to the conclusion that my next professional move should be to Canada and visiting the Cropleys confirmed that idea. They gave me a good idea of what living in Canada was like – that is, on bright, sunny autumn days.

From there, I presented at universities in Lethbridge, Calgary and Edmonton, all in Alberta. The University of Alberta at Edmonton was the important one. I gave seminars to the Centre for Theoretical Psychology, where Raymond B. Cattell was visiting and who was very encouraging, which was not good. It led to an attack of hubris, which blinded me to such an extent I gave a seminar to local psychiatrists on the psychotherapeutic implications of the coding model. I was brought down to earth with a thud in the later discussion by a gentle rap on the knuckles, which Canadians are so good at doing without giving offence.

My main purpose was to present at the Department of Educational Psychology, headed by Barney Corman. Barney and the deputy head, the gentlemanly Wilf Schmidt, wined and dined me in the revolving restaurant in the posh new Chateau Lacombe. I left Edmonton with the impression that an offer would follow me to Australia.

Meantime, Sid Dunn, a new professor of education at Monash, persuaded those who needed to be persuaded that placing the Educational Research Office in administration wasn't working. He proposed a new Higher Education Research Unit housed in the Faculty of Education, with him as overall Director. I suppose it was a bit of a backhander to me but I couldn't have cared less. I, and a new appointee, would have academic status at last. I had remarried, my new wife Margaret had three children, and I suspected our future was not going to be at Monash.

As indeed it wasn't.

Chapter 7

So Sensible, so Canadian: The University of Alberta

The offer from Alberta came: associate professor of educational psychology, at double my Monash salary. The University of Alberta, consistently rated as one of the best in Canada, was founded in 1906 and is situated on a striking campus beside the North Saskatchewan River. In winter, I saw a stunning snow-scape from my office window, drawing the eye to downtown Edmonton; in summer, the river was hidden by lush green trees that framed the CBD. Assistance in teaching and research was readily available, and the atmosphere was cooperative and nonpolitical – at least from where I saw things. I was secure at last in a post that was definitely my thing. Students were keen, staff were cooperative, mutual respect was high (mostly), and infra-structure generous.

The department had 36 members, and their job was to teach psychology to student teachers in a Faculty of Education comprising some 400 staff. I was teaching entirely within my area of interest, teaching only what I wanted to teach, supervising dissertations only on topics I was happy to supervise. So different from Australia, I was to learn. I was also given a graduate student as a research assistant, which was a form of scholarship for them. If I needed any teaching assistants, I had only to ask.

Canadian universities were riding high at that time, Alberta higher than most. Universities were funded by the province, rather like in the old days in Australia when they were state funded, but Canadian funding was lavish, especially so in Alberta thanks to oil royalties. The public perception was that university education was a good thing, and ‘professors’, as all academics were called irrespective of rank, were high in public esteem. It was a light year away from the pretentious foolery I had experienced at the University of New England, or the academic vacuum I personally was in at Monash. Canadian universities mostly followed American rather than British lines, in that they charged fees before economic rationalism made that *de rigueur*, they drew a larger participation rate than did British and Australian universities of the time and they followed a 4 year degree modular pattern. Canadian universities were, however, rather more rigorous than the typical American state university. Research and publication were highly influential in

appointment and promotion, and teaching was given a higher priority than was the case in Australia.

There was a culture of respect at the U of A, which I must say became a little too indiscriminating at times. That is, colleagues gave you face, as the Chinese would say, and did not openly, or even behind your back, try to disparage you, which I was to discover they frequently did in Australia and later in Hong Kong. The Canadian style sometimes led to soft marking and to granting of tenure and promotions that in some cases weren't deserved, but, well, it's the old question: Do you prefer to make Type 1 or Type 2 errors? A Type 1 error is where one is innocent until proven guilty, which means the guilty sometimes get away with it; a Type 2 error where one is guilty until proven innocent, which means you punish the guilty, but the innocent are likely to suffer too.

In times of plenty, we feel we can afford Type 1 errors, but in times of perceived stringency, we feel safer with Type 2 errors. Or to take a different example, asylum seekers are better seen as terrorists, knowing that most are not, so best to lock them all up. Yes, we're now living in Type 2 times but in Canada in the sixties and seventies it was a time of generosity and plenty, a long and happy summer, just like the summer of Skepparholmen.

But it's not only the times. I also think that Canadians feel more comfortable making Type 1 rather than Type 2 errors, whereas we Australians do not. We, rather like Americans, seem to feel it necessary to prove publicly that we have high testosterone levels, and that no bleeding hearts are going to pull the wool over *our* eyes.

It was in Alberta that my academic work really took off. There were excellent computing facilities, and plenty of research money and assistance. I continued working on the *Study Behaviour Questionnaire* I'd developed at Monash on ways of studying. The original questionnaire had too many scales to be practically useful so I reduced it statistically: higher order factor analysis produced three over-riding scales that I called reproducing, internalising, and organising, each with motive and strategy subscales:

- *Reproducing*: Motive: to avoid failure; Strategy: use a reproducing (rote-learning) strategy.

- *Internalising*: Motive: to understand; Strategy: internalising the meaning of the content to use it in new applications.
- *Organising*: Motive: to get best grades; Strategy: organise work, keep good notes, allocate time according to importance, ‘study skills’.

Thus, students scoring high on internalising have a motive to understand, so they use the strategy of searching for meaning and applications; they do not rote learn, as that does not lead to understanding. If they want to achieve top grades, they schedule their time appropriately. It made sense. I explored relationships between different student learning ‘styles’ (as I called them then) and various methods of teaching and assessment, work that led to several publications.

I also taught courses on learning and development, from introductory to graduate level. In the absence of what I thought was an ideal text, I wrote my own, based on my coding model. I sent a proposal to Random House who sent me a contract and an advance of \$2,000. I was to present them with the finished manuscript within two years.

In 1972, three years after joining the department, Corman called me into his office. ‘Congratulations,’ he said, ‘the promotions committee have decided to appoint you full professor.’

Unknown to me, but it was apparently usual Canadian practice, Corman had taken my CV, obtained opinions from two external referees, presented my case before the Faculty’s promotions committee and they gave me the thumbs up.

Full professor and I hadn’t even applied for it.

Another strong positive about Canadian academe was that Canadian universities had a summer session, in which two semester courses were crammed into six weeks at different universities across the country. This meant that students could continue their studies, make up failed courses, or work full-time and still do their degrees; expensive university facilities were utilised throughout the year, which pleased politicians and public; and staff could earn extra if they wished – so sensible, so Canadian. Back in Australia at that time, universities lay idle during vacations.

My best summer session was at the University of Victoria on beautiful Vancouver Island. The class was mind-blowing, to use the lingo of the students. Of the 20 or so

students about half were American draft dodgers: Prime Minister Trudeau's liberal Canada allowed Americans to cross the border into Canada where they were immune from the draft for the Vietnam War. My students had strong ideas about what the world should be like, and in particular about what and how they wanted to be taught.

At our first meeting, their leader, an American called Robert Hayman, asked me what I proposed to teach them. I went through the course outline: standard cognitive psychology applied to teaching. Robert shook his head, smiling gently.

'If ya want a good responsive class, John, ya should throw away all that head-shit and let us do our thing. You can do your thing by summing up however ya like, John.'

Good Christ, what had I got into? I played it cool. 'Well, tell me more. What are your various things?'

He and a guy called Steve then went into a prepared skit on the military-industrial complex and how it was screwing us all up, especially education, and there was this guy called Ivan Illich, see, who said the best schooling is no schooling, like we're talking deschooling here. Let the kids learn in the market place, where it's all at, not in institutions that prostitute them. Et cetera. But, hey, weren't these guys here precisely to be prepared for teaching in schools?

Whatever the answer to that question, we compromised. I proposed a list of my things – topics like motivation, development, problem solving, intelligence and intelligence testing – around which each of them could wrap his or her own thing, in so far as their thing arose out of the past year of in school experience. In that first two hours, we designed a brand new programme, consisting mainly of individual presentations that were to be written up, modified according to feedback, and that would be the final assessment for the course.

'Okay John, but no heavy trips on assessment. Pass/Fail. Okay?'

I wondered if Robert, Steve and the rest weren't conning me big time. Yet I could see some point in what they were suggesting, and I'm always interested in innovative teaching. And I was leaving in six weeks. 'Okay' is what I said.

They put a lot of energy and originality into their presentations. They addressed my topics, however whackily. For example, one heavily built bearded guy chose 'arousal' as his topic. Starting off quietly enough, he suddenly produced a .45 revolver and a fired a shot through the open classroom window. In one nanosecond, we were all *very highly*

aroused. One pregnant girl had hysterics and had to be taken outside to recover. The class rounded on him for being a fucking idiot, duly shaming him. So you see it worked. Kind of.

Some had excellent suggestions for improving teaching in their area (not the above bearded guy), principally by building on students' interests, and we had fun. Edmonton was not like this; Australia was on another planet. The whole philosophy of alternatives to formal schooling, the wild side of hippiedom, the counter-culture inhabited by these draft dodgers, were eye-openers.

And somehow all this was relevant to education.

I hadn't been at the U of A for two years when we decided the winters were just too punishing: snow on the ground for six to seven months. Temperatures sometimes fell to that point where Fahrenheit and Centigrade coincide – at minus 40°. The children were still homesick for Australia, although they liked school in Canada and had acquired genuine-sounding Canadian accents. Their voices had gone into a kind of no person's land for almost a year, during which their stretched Australian vowels tightened up but not yet arriving at the clipped, throaty chuckle of their peers. For a while, they sounded more like poshish Southern English than anything. The reverse process, moving from Canadian to Australian, took two weeks. That either suggests that the kids were hard-wired with Aussie accents as default, or that Australian kids were rather less tolerant of foreign sounding kids than Canadian kids were. I think the latter is the more likely explanation.

So within two years of going to Canada, despite the dream environment in which I was researching and publishing, and getting good ratings from the students for my teaching, I was working on returning to Australia. I followed the ads in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* carefully and applied for chairs at Macquarie, Monash, and Tasmania but was unsuccessful. I mentioned my intention to Corman, who flipped: 'We bend over backwards to get you bloody people out here and next thing you're running out on us.' Now I think of it, maybe that was why he had already promoted me to full professor.

Soon after that jolt to my conscience, however, I saw the University of Newcastle was advertising for a second chair in Education. It was a real conflict. On the one hand, loyalty to Corman, recognition that professionally speaking life at U of A was as good as

it gets, the kids by now had good friends and were happy. On the other hand, the weather was foul most of the year. And we still called Australia home.

I decided to apply for Newcastle after all, but without much enthusiasm. I received a letter telling me that the Vice-Chancellor of Newcastle, Professor James J. Auchmuty, would be visiting Montreal on a certain date. Could I meet him there, in connection with my application for the Chair in Education?

No harm in that. We arranged to meet in a hotel, where we would have lunch at the '777' restaurant, so named because that was its height in feet above sea level. We met in the foyer, this heavily built man with flushed jowls and posh-Irish accent and I. He offered me warm, limp herrings to shake. He explained he chose this restaurant because they had a marvellous smorgasbord. I would have thought it was because we could talk uninterruptedly but that did not seem to be the idea at all. He headed straight for the food and loaded his plate, explaining we could talk while we did the rounds. He seemed in a hurry to sample the available delights, for by the time I'd finished selecting what to eat, he was up and on his second round. We overlapped for about five minutes, before he was up and off yet again.

This was not an ideal situation for an interview but as he didn't seem very interested in what I might have to say I don't suppose it mattered. He didn't ask any questions; he did all the talking. He told me that the Department of Education at Newcastle was likely to become a faculty and it would incorporate the Teachers' College. This sounded ominous to me – why would I want to become involved in all that administrative bullshit? – but I wasn't quick enough with my questions. He was off about the other professors at Newcastle by name: X was 'totally untrustworthy, a liar', but Y 'not quite so bad but you had to watch him', and Z 'a good solid chap'. I was dumbfounded. Would he be telling me such dangerous information if I were going to get the job?

Downstairs in the foyer, he extended soft, limp herrings again: 'Ah well, Mr ... er... Professor ah...', turned and was gone.

I concluded that I hadn't got the job. And just as bloody well, I thought.

When I returned to Edmonton, I told Margaret of the interview and we agreed that that was it: we would settle for staying in Canada. There was a terrific house for sale, just

up the street from where we rented, and going for only \$34,500. It suited us perfectly; we bought it. No sooner had the contract been signed, I received an offer from Newcastle.

I had got the job.

Ken Dutton, who was Vice-Principal of Newcastle University, explained in his biography of James Auchmuty how the latter selected his staff:

John Biggs had indeed got the job, and had had his first experience of the Auchmuty method of appointment. Usually, James had made his mind up in advance... with the result that the 'interview' was hardly ever more than a formality.³⁸

I wasn't entirely pleased. I wrote back saying that I needed a full year to finish my work – in particular that educational psychology text under contract to Random House – and said that I would take up the appointment a year from now. I hoped they'd refuse, when I'd reflected on my lunch with Auchmuty, but they didn't refuse. I felt I had to accept.

But what about those things Auchmuty had told me at lunch when we were 777 ft above sea level? Such things as upgrading the Department of Education into a faculty, and amalgamating with Newcastle Teachers' College? All of this would heavily involve a new professor in activities that this new professor did not look forward to one little bit. I wrote to the Foundation Professor of Education, Laurie Short, whom I'd met previously, asking what was the state of progress. Silence. Weeks later, I wrote again. Silence. This was bordering on the insulting. I wrote a third time, ccing the letter to Auchmuty, demanding to know what was going on.

Laurie wrote back post haste expressing his anger that I'd cced my letter to the VC and giving me a cursory update. It was not wise to so antagonise an important future colleague, I knew that, but I felt I had a right to know these things if I was going to be in the hot seat.

And I didn't like what I eventually heard. It seemed like a whole crockload of shit, as the Canadians would say. As, indeed, it turned out to be. I should have given in to my

³⁸ Dutton, K. *Auchmuty*, Mt. Nebo: Boombana, Publications, 2000. pp. 374 –5. I had told Ken the story of my interview and of my amazement at being appointed.

intuition, which was to cancel the deal, using as an excuse – not inaccurate – that I had not been kept informed of crucial developments.

But I didn't. All the indications were that I was about to do the wrong thing, but I had given my word. And Biggs was an honourable man. However, I still hadn't finished that book for Random House, so I vowed that it would be a top priority when in Newcastle. Part of the arrangement was that I would be head of department for three years, while Short took study leave, but I was determined not to let administration sabotage my scholarship.

Those were the days when only professors could be entrusted with the task of administering departments, and the only route to being a professor was by research and publications. So doing what you were good at put you in a position where you had to do something you may well have been very bad at. But I had accepted Newcastle and that was that. When the time came to leave Canada's shores Margaret and I had to drag three kicking and screaming Canadians with us. At the airport, Carolyn's friends, eyes streaming, wailing their sorrow, formed a weeping wall as we boarded.

I sure as hell hoped it was going to be worth it. The omens were not good.

Chapter 8

Some Readjustment is Necessary: The University of Newcastle

Newcastle had begun as a punishment centre for particularly recalcitrant convicts sent up from Sydney, with the mighty Hawkesbury River to prevent them from sneaking back to Sydney's proto-civilisation. Newcastle was sitting on large coal seams, and during and after the convict era, coalmining was the major industry. By the time I had arrived, BHP was by far the largest employer, with its vast plant on Kooragang Island (today the university is the largest employer). Newcastle was then 'a working man's town', as I was abruptly reminded when trying to buy avocados, which we used to eat regularly in Canada. I had asked a fruit shop proprietor why I couldn't buy avocados anywhere when they were grown only a couple of hundred miles up the NSW coast. 'And ya won't mate,' he assured me. 'This is a working man's town and ya won't get that classy sort of stuff 'ere.'

The Newcastle University College arose out of Newcastle Technical College in 1951. The college was established under the authority of the then University of Technology New South Wales, now the University of New South Wales, with just five full-time students. Study was restricted to engineering, mathematics and science. In 1965, the college became the autonomous University of Newcastle. At the opening ceremony, the Professor of Classics, the charmingly eccentric Godfrey Tanner, poured wine libations onto the ground in order 'to sanctify the land upon which the University rests'. The founding Vice-Chancellor was James J. Auchmuty, with whom I had broken bread in Montreal, 777 ft about sea level. Auchmuty later said of the new university: 'What I was proposing to establish was a university in the British tradition.'³⁹ Actually this went down

³⁹ Quoted in Ken Dutton's *Auchmuty: The life of James Johnston Auchmuty*. Mt. Nebo, Q: Boombana Publications, 2000, p. 321.

very well locally because ‘few people in Newcastle understood such matters and those who did wanted a university of the most traditional kind.’⁴⁰

And at first that is what they got, with some idiosyncratic Auchmutyisms thrown in. By ‘at first’ I mean during Auchmuty’s reign, which came to an end just over a year after I had joined the staff. Auchmuty himself had things firmly under control; he was liked and respected despite his odd ways in interviewing prospective staff. But after he had left, things started falling apart.

Sure enough, Newcastle started out ominously. I repeated the mistake I made when setting out for Armidale eleven years earlier. I’d forgotten that academics are expected to travel first-class in trains. Laurie Short nearly missed us, as he waited at the first-class carriage while we descended from second-class, just as had occurred previously with Jim Richardson in Armidale.

Given the tenor of our previous correspondence, Laurie was thoughtfulness itself. He took us to the City Motel in downtown Newcastle, which was to be our home until we could find our own accommodation, and then to his home where his wife Elvie fed us generously.

Laurie introduced me to colleagues in other departments, including Godfrey Tanner, he who had sanctified the campus with libations of wine. Godfrey had a boyish face, a quirky smile and a charming hesitation in his speech he had cultivated during his undergraduate days at Oxford. From Melbourne originally, Godfrey, in academic gown as always, held his hand out for me to shake. As I did so, I was informed: ‘You are now, d-dear boy, sh-shaking the hand of the finest Latin s-speaking s-sodomite in the S-Southern Hemisphair!’

Godfrey’s love of self-mocking theatre led to his being savagely attacked, several years later, in a poofter-bashing incident. Godfrey’s *Brideshead Revisited* antics were unappreciated in working class Newcastle.

Margaret and I quickly learned that Newcastle schools were very different animals from laid-back Canadian schools, which never used corporal punishment or had uniform regulations, where children were encouraged to stay behind after school for games and

⁴⁰ Don Wright, *Looking back: The history of the University of Newcastle*, University of Newcastle, 1992, p. 99.

hobbies. In Newcastle schools at that time (but not now) corporal punishment was normal for boys, strict dress regulations were enforced, children were lined up paramilitary style and harangued over PA systems for morning assembly, and after 4 pm the school grounds were empty and silent, the gates locked, a security firm on patrol.

Margaret and I were strongly opposed to corporal punishment and used an option the NSW Department of Education had made available: we could, if we cared that much, request in writing that corporal punishment not be used on our children. The brutal fact that the kids would be paying the price for our stand hadn't occurred to us. Naively, we operated on the assumption that principals and teachers were professionals who would hold the students' wellbeing foremost. But this wasn't middle class Canada, but working class Newcastle where government schools were part of its eco-system. Working class kids were meant to be licked into shape as compliant workers, or else they were troublemaking little bastards – no doubt wound up by shit-stirring parents – and to be marginalised. Thus, when Greg had not done some homework particularly well, the teacher sneered: 'And what would your *father*, the *professor*, think of this, eh? *Eh?*' while shoving Greg's work into his face. Greg said, 'I'm leaving.' And as he could at age 16, he did.

And as that teacher had accurately pointed out, I was indeed a professor of Education at the University of Newcastle in the interesting position of preparing teachers to operate in such a system.

I became Head of Department on arrival. I, who had just been admonished by the Dean at Alberta for attending only two Faculty meetings during my entire stay there, had to chair departmental meetings, a job in which I'd had no previous experience and that I quickly learned to hate. I then had to present our departmental motions to the Education Board of Studies of the Faculty of Arts, then re-present them to the Standing Committee of the Faculty of Arts, then yet again to the Faculty of Arts meeting itself, then still again to the Standing Committee of Senate (as Professorial Board was called), then finally, at long last, to Senate itself.

I suppose the intended function of these standing committees was to cut debate, but it didn't work that way given the loquacious propensity of certain colleagues. I had to be present at all meetings and to present the same case to be debated up to six times. My

often expressed views on time-wasting usually received a sympathetic hearing, but the truth was that too many of my colleagues positively enjoyed these elaborate rituals.

I could understand people like Vice-Principal Bryn Newton-John enjoying these theatrical displays of pseudo-academic plumage – his tongue was almost as golden as his daughter Olivia's. A Vice-Principal was required to be an impressive front man and Bryn filled that role perfectly. It was the non-Bryn Newton-Johns revelling in all this puffery who disappointed me.

I can best describe the proceedings of Senate with this little cameo, with apologies to Laurie Taylor of *The Times Higher Education Supplement*:

'I submit, Vice-Chancellor, that a procedural motion might expedite the debate at this juncture...'

'So move!' Short, sharp, business-like, no nonsense.

'If I may say so, Vice-Chancellor, and with due respect to my learned colleagues, the proposed motion would appear to be somewhat out of order. If I may I refer to Standing Orders, and then to the minutes of the previous meeting, I would like to draw the attention of Senate ...'

Why, I wondered, if Newcastle was a working man's town, were so many in leadership roles in the University filled by figures imported from – or by figures who worked strenuously at the appearance of having been imported from – an establishment from another shore?

Also imported from that shore was a by-blow of the Westminster system: opposition for opposition's sake.

In Canada, it had been: 'Ah, so you want to put on a new course (for example). Good, how can we help to make it work as well as possible?'

In Newcastle, it was: 'Ah, so you want to put on a new course. I'm going to oppose that on principle. You'll have to make your case and convince me – yes, *me!* I'm going to make you sweat it out. And if you poach any of my student numbers, you're dead.'

John Kirby, who had joined my staff from Canada, captured the Newcastle way of academic negotiation thus:

Professor A: 'I want to propose so-and-so'

Professor B: 'You'll get it over my dead body.'

Professor A: 'But I've got a good case!'

Professor B: 'And I've got the numbers.'

The formation of a Faculty of Education, already mooted by Laurie, would cut out two steps in that tortuous route to Senate: the Faculty of Arts and its Board of Studies. And in 1975 that came to pass as we became a one-department Faculty. In the absence of any other contenders, I became Dean.

It was then that I truly became aware of the accuracy of the Kirby analysis.

One of the most important roles of the head of department was to put in a request for resources to the Allocations Committee. In my first go at this, I thought I'd play it cool. I asked the staff what they wanted. Nothing much. We were going into a new building in a couple of years and we'd need lots then, but no, we needed nothing this year and the only thing the following year was a new photocopier. But the year after that, we'd need to equip a new building, so best, thought I, to save up until then. Accordingly, I told the Allocations Committee we'd be right for this year, but we'd be putting in for a new photocopier for next year and then we'd really go for it when we had to equip the new building. Done.

When the Allocations Committee reported to Senate that equipment for Education was zero, Laurie Short, yet to take his sabbatical off campus, jerked his head up in outrage.

'Education is being victimised yet again!' he roared. 'I move the Report be sent back to the Allocations Committee to reconsider Education's allocation!'

Laurie glared at me to second the motion. Bugger him, this was my call not his. The motion lapsed for want of a seconder.

He later stormed into my office. 'Why didn't you second my motion?'

'Because I didn't ask for anything. I'm saving up for the new building.'

That wasn't the way this game was played. Department heads *always* asked for resources, whether they wanted them or not. Laurie thought I was naive to the point of stupidity.

The following year, it was time to buy that photocopier. By this stage, Bryn Newton-John had retired, his successor being Alan Tweedy, RN, who had a history of running tight ships. I was summoned to the bridge: his office, that is.

Glaring icily over the tops of his rimless glasses, he rapped out that I had violated procedures: 'Heads of Departments are not authorised to sign orders greater than \$3,000.'

'I didn't know that.'

'You should. It's in the University Procedures Manual.'

'Oh well, sorry about that, but there's no difficulty. The photocopier was only a couple of hundred over the stipulated maximum. The Departmental budget can meet the shortfall easily.'

'The point is not whether or not the Department budget can meet the shortfall. The point is that you have violated University procedures. *That's* the point.'

I couldn't believe it. There I was, a head of a department, being treated like an errant junior rating over a non-existent problem. I turned and left. As I went through his door, I looked back.

Tweedie was looking down at his desk, grinning with self-satisfaction.

But I was not done with Vice-Principal Tweedie, RN. The Vice-Principal was also the Parking Officer for the University. As Tweedie said at one pre-Senate luncheon we deans had inflicted on us: 'I regard parking as my most important responsibility as Vice-Principal.'

It figured.

I'd bought a nice little Honda 90 motorcycle. It freed up the car for Margaret (on fine days), was absurdly cheap to run and could be parked anywhere. So I parked it anywhere. Like outside my office where there wasn't a parking bay.

Security kept giving me parking fines, I kept leaving gentle little notes on my pillion seat for them, like this one:

Dear Security Officer,

It's quite okay, this little machine doesn't take up much room. By parking here I'm easing the load in the main car park.

(Sgd) Professor John Biggs, Dean of Education.

Tweedie summoned me to the bridge again, accusing me this time of attempting to intimidate security by pulling rank as the Dean of Education. Further, I had about \$100 in fines to pay and pay I had better, or else.

I sensed that Tweedie would enjoy making a capital case out of this and I had more important things to save my adrenalin for. I agreed to pay one (1) fine of \$20, and would use the car park in future, but, as I explained in a long memo, I hoped he understood that I was thereby taking up much needed space as there was indeed a parking problem at the University. If he, as the officer responsible for parking, thought that was the sensible way to go, then go that way I would. Of course he thought it sensible: the *Procedures Manual* so ordained. We concluded on that uneasy compromise.

At another luncheon we discussed the film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Tweedie expressed the unusual view that Nurse Ratchett was the character for whom he felt most sympathy: not Jack Nicholson, not the Indian chief, not any of the other inmates.

Again, it figured.

'The motion was carried 2 for, 12 against.'

So said a member of the Department of Psychology. The two for the motion were Professor John Keats, Head of Department, and Associate Professor Daphne Keats, his wife; the 12 against were the rest of the department. The Keats family had won the day, as it always had.

In fact the power of the name 'Keats' extended even further. Professor Reyn Keats, John's older brother, was the Dean of the Faculty of Mathematics. John and Reyn displayed much brotherly cohesion.

John Keats had strongly supported my appointment. He'd known me previously and he perceived me as biddable, a judgement he later came to revise. John saw Education as psychology-related and therefore within his bailiwick. Pretty soon I realised what he intended me role to be: if not as the Keats mole, then as an ally within the enemy camp.

Much of the enmity between Keats and Laurie Short had come about because a post in developmental psychology had been advertised in Education and for which Daphne Keats was well qualified and she had applied for it. Laurie was determined to avoid what he saw as a psychological cuckoo in the educational nest. Which was understandable. What was incomprehensible was that he blocked Daphne's appointment

by changing the post overnight to one in another area and then appointing the wife of one of his own academic staff. War had been declared between psychology and education.

John Keats therefore saw my appointment as healing the rift between the two departments and to foster inter-departmental cooperation. But it was a rocky road.

I wanted to organise our new Faculty into departments. I had experienced this system in the University of Alberta and liked it because we could then specialise in our areas of expertise. I knew Senate would never agree, because it would give Education too much power (two more heads of department would mean two more Education seats on Senate). Instead, I went for divisions within the existing department, which didn't have that consequence. One division would be a Division of Educational Psychology. I was telling Daphne Keats this in my artless way at a departmental party.

'Oh, what an absurd notion!' she laughed. 'Out of the question. You must call it something else, anything but "psychology".'

'Why not call it psychology? We're teaching psychology and the staff involved are all full members of the Australian Psychological Society.'

'Anything but psychology, John. *We* are the Psychology Department.'

'Oh come on, Daphne,' I too now laughed gaily as I sipped cask red from a paper cup, 'you're being too territorial. We've evolved higher than dogs pissing on trees, surely.'

Apparently we hadn't. Next day, an irate John Keats knocked at my door, the strain of trying to smile pleasantly bringing a sheen to his brow. He went straight to the point.

'Call it whatever you like, behavioural sciences, educational studies, whatever, but *not* psychology. If you use another name, I'll support you, but if you persist in "psychology", I'll make damned sure the whole idea of divisions is crushed.'

There was quite an exchange. There was only one way in which it could finish. I had the last words and there were two of them, 'off' being the last.

I held the door open for him.

Reyn Keats was at one stage Deputy Chairman of Senate, the equivalent of Chairman of Professorial Board anywhere else⁴¹, which meant he was the most powerful academic in the University and could make or break most proposals.

At one Standing Committee I reported as a matter of routine that the Faculty was about to float a journal.

‘Can’t,’ growled Reyn.

‘Why not? It’ll give the Faculty visibility and it will encourage staff to publish more.’ I was all sweet reasonableness.

‘Because faculties don’t have resources. Departments do but not faculties.’

‘We’ve thought of that. The department will supply the resources, but we’ll call it published by the Faculty, with a Faculty logo.’

‘That’s illegal.’

I wasn’t going to waste time arguing. We’d do it anyway, none of his bloody business or Senate’s. I was reporting, not asking for anything.

That afternoon, a second irate Professor Keats presented himself at my office.

‘I’m worried about what you said about the journal.’

‘No need to Reyn. It’s not a problem. It’s a departmental decision and the department will foot the bill.’

‘Well I’m telling you now; it’s illegal and it cannot be done.’

As before, there was quite an exchange, with only one way in which it could finish. I had the last words, and again there were two, the first word different from my previous such exchange: that word was ‘piss’.

I held the door open for him.

My forthrightness probably did me a lot of damage. The Keats Brothers would no doubt have exchanged their stories about the Biggs mode of finalising discussions. The incidents would surely have reached the ears of Don George the Vice-Chancellor, and could even have been a factor in George’s later determination to shaft Education. But fair’s fair. There’s no way I would have ordered other colleagues how to run their department, so

⁴¹ This was another Auchmuty idiosyncrasy, which allowed the VC to chair Senate. The Deputy Chairman was elected by members of Senate specifically to represent Senate’s views in the event of strong disagreement between Senate and the VC. It worked with Auchmuty but with his successor, Don George, it turned out to be calamitous, as shall be seen.

when I was told how to run mine, when it was none of their business, I believed I had every right to tell them to butt out – but more politely, I now have to admit.

There was a strange sequel to my interaction with Reyn. Shortly afterwards, I spent a week at a marathon encounter group in Canberra, at which, as is often the way at encounter groups, I floated on a sea of contrived and temporary love.

I was still floating when I saw Reyn by the Commonwealth Bank. I approached him, I put my arm around his shoulder. Lovingly.

‘Great to see you, Reyn. You know that business about the journal? Well, *I feel that* (the magic encounter group words!) we all got a little too excited. It’s no big deal really, is it?’

I could feel him melting under my embrace.

‘Well, not really, I suppose.’ He grinned at me. Shyly.

We published the journal. Not another word was said about it. I never got around to publishing anything in it myself, not that I can remember. Truth to tell, it wasn’t a very memorable journal.

Despite all this carry-on, I managed to complete that textbook for Random House and send it off. The New York-based editor with whom I’d been working had left and the new editor knew next to nothing about the original proposal except that the MS was overdue and likely therefore to be out of date. He sent it to a reviewer at Florida State University for comments. The reviewer, a specialist in reading research, made the following observations:

- Yes, the text needed updating.
- There was not enough material on reading.
- Leave the manuscript with him and he’d see that what needed doing would be done.
- And it would be published with him as senior author.

Oh no it wouldn’t. As my text, I would be senior author. I so informed the new Random House editor, who threw up his hands and, as he put it to me, he did not intend ‘to play a Henry Kissinger role’ a response no doubt made easier by the fact that I was in faraway Australia.

Preparing that text involved reflecting on and writing about the whole knowledge base for my teaching, thus providing me with a very firm grounding in my subject matter. This text had however been designed for North American schooling, and I realised fairly quickly that much of it was irrelevant to what schooling in Australia was about. The differences between Australian and North American schooling, and teacher preparation for each, were significant. We needed our own home-grown text, with our own examples, tuned to the conditions, awful though they sometimes were, in Australia's schools. No such text existed at that time.

The standard way of teaching educational psychology was to prescribe an encyclopaedic textbook, which systematically outlined what Binet, Bruner, Dewey, Gagné, Gardner, Piaget, Thorndike, Torrance and a dozen others had said. The students learned this material, but they were rarely assessed on how well they applied it to teaching practice, which was surely why they should be learning all that stuff in the first place. Instead, their knowledge was assessed on how well they'd learned what was in the textbooks, which – in itself – doesn't have much at all to do with teaching.⁴²

I recast the content to fit the Australian context and *Process of Learning* was the eventual result. To make it as practical and applicable in Australian schools as possible, I decided to have each chapter divided into a Section A, comprising a set of psychological topics, and Section B, suggesting how those might be applied to Australian conditions. I then decided that someone with detailed knowledge of schools, like an educational administrator and my colleague Ross Telfer in particular, should write the Section Bs: the only teaching experience in Australian schools I'd had was two terms, long past, at the very atypical Hutchins School.

Prentice-Hall Australia liked this text; we signed a contract and the book appeared in 1982. By 1986, Prentice-Hall agreed it was time for a second edition, which came out in 1987; and again in 1993, only with another colleague, Phil Moore, to do the Section Bs as Ross had pulled out by that stage. The book was not the usual encyclopaedic run down on who'd said what, but a framework that teachers could use to form their own teaching decisions in the context of Australian schools. For a while, it was the most used text for teacher education in Australian universities.

⁴² See also pp. XXXXX

Process of Learning was also used in aviation training. Jim Sparke, the Director of an air training school at Cessnock, ambitiously called NASA (Nationwide Aviation Space Academy), called in early 1980 to the Education Faculty. He had a problem. To become a commercial pilot, apart from passing the exams, a trainee pilot had to spend long hours in flying time. To build up the hours needed to become an airline pilot they became flight instructors. The problem was that these trainee pilots had no training as instructors yet they were doing the lion's share of pilot instruction in the country. Further, the syllabus required pre-flight briefings on hideously abstract principles from physics that weren't obviously related to flying experience. Could we help?

Their problem was essentially similar to ours: teachers having to integrate theory with practice. Ross Telfer and I (mainly Ross) adapted the Section Bs of *Process of Learning* to aviation.⁴³ The book was adopted by Embry Riddle University Florida, and was taken up in the Lufthansa Training School in Frankfurt, for which service to the airline industry we each received a round-the-world Business Class ticket and a nice ride in the spectacular Lufthansa train. The Belgian airline, Sabena, asked if they could translate the work for their pilots. We agreed, but for that service we didn't even receive a ride on a Belgian tram.

Education faculties in most universities tend to be cloven in twain, but unlike Plato's hermaphrodites, the two halves do not wish to seek the other half to become soul mates again. One half is comprised of those with academic roots, such as historians, psychologists and philosophers. Most have academic aspirations but there's frequently a rump of sociologists or philosophers with political aspirations: Marxist-anarchists they called themselves in my department.

The other half of education staff comprises those with professional roots in the classroom: teachers of mathematics, geography, English and other school subjects, who teach the students how to teach the school curricula, how to keep order in the classroom, and those other things that teachers ought to know about and be able to do. These staff members are in an ambiguous situation: they are classified as academics and are expected to do research when few of them have a research background. In the university scheme of things they are seen by academic staff as second class citizens and they resent it. In all, it

⁴³ R. Telfer & J. Biggs, *The Psychology of Flight Training*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1988.

can be an unhappy mix, with destructive power plays between the two factions. I have seen it in several universities, not just in Newcastle.

My main problem was the hard core of three Marxist-anarchists. One said to me straight up, soon after my arrival: 'I'm going to oppose everything you propose. You, as department head, have more power than the rest of us. It is a given that you will be making decisions to maintain or enhance your own personal power.'

He liked wearing message badges, including one: 'No God, No Master.' This prompted my colleague Jack Doczy to make the brilliantly perceptive comment: 'I see he's read another book.' Our Marxist-anarchist then must have read yet another book, this one published in Disneyland, for he bought a set of Mickey Mouse ears and wore them at departmental meetings. He argued against whatever came from the chair, grinning and pulling faces sidelong at his colleagues.

I tried the Keller Plan of teaching, in which students progress through the course at their own pace, moving to the next section when they have passed a test on the previous section. It is therefore possible for students, if they want to, to pass a semester-length course in two or three weeks. Science graduates loved it; Arts graduates hated it. It required the tutors to be flexible with their time, which one tutor wasn't, deliberately I fear. For these reasons, I dropped it the following year. In the year when it was running, I read in *Opus*, the student paper, a letter to the editor about

...a certain unscrupulous Head of Department who has set *his* text book as *the* one and only text ... To ensure that students are thoroughly ingrained in the bourgeois ideology of his pearls of wisdom., he has also set compulsory exams on *every* chapter of his right wing propaganda...⁴⁴

That was the work of a member of my own staff. What should I have done: go to court or ignore it? I chose the latter. I treated it as childish destructiveness, on the same level as opposing everything on principle while wearing Mickey Mouse ears (not the same person, incidentally). I learned to develop a thick skin and as far as ongoing policy was concerned, the far left crazies were outvoted on most matters of importance at staff meetings. Er, let me revise my terminology. They weren't 'far left crazies', they were nihilistic fascists. I wouldn't want to give far left crazies a bad name.

⁴⁴ *Opus* (undated). I kept the cutting but omitted the date.

In 1979, Arthur Jensen and Hans Eysenck came to Australia on a lecture tour of universities, both propounding genetic theories of intelligence and personality. At a meeting of the Australian Psychological Society, convened for Jensen in Melbourne, I presented a paper⁴⁵ explaining Jensen's data in terms of a model of simultaneous and successive processing that had been developed by my friend from Edmonton days, J. P. Das, and his student and now my colleague, John Kirby. This model made no genetic assumptions about ability. Which model you chose, Jensen or Das-Kirby, hinged on the interpretation of a statistical point. Jensen generously praised the paper but of course disagreed with my conclusions.

Jensen was a significant figure in theories of intelligence. Accordingly, I referred to him in my text *Process of Learning* (1982: pp. 390-7), outlining his theory along with the Das-Kirby model that countered it. For my pains, there was another outburst in the student paper about 'a certain professor of education peddling the racist views of Arthur Jensen.'

This sort of unacademic behaviour only confirmed the opinion the rest of the university tended to have about education staff, which was either that they were failed psychologists, philosophers or sociologists, otherwise they'd be in psychology, philosophy or sociology departments, or that they were ex-schoolies, not academics at all. Which is drastically unfair. Think Ann Brown, for a start.

Yet I remember taking my usual lunchtime jog round the picturesque golf-course just outside the university grounds. I posed myself a question: 'If I won the Lottery, so that I never had to work again, what would I do?'

I'd upgrade house and car, take a long trip, donate as appropriate, all that of course; and then? I'd do exactly what I was doing before: Be an academic. I probably wouldn't even move from Newcastle. As I didn't when in October 1977 I might have had the opportunity. I received a letter from Wally Worth, Dean of Education at the University of Alberta, inviting me to apply for the Chairmanship of my old Department of Educational Psychology. Had that arrived at any other time, I would surely have thrown my hat in the ring. But then, at that time, my work in two different but related areas having

⁴⁵ Biggs, J. B. (1978) Genetics and education: An alternative to Jensenism. *Educational Researcher*, 7(4), 11-17.

just taken off, I wrote back along these lines: Thank you so much for thinking of me. I'm sorry, but not right now.

So you see it couldn't have been all that bad. Not then. But it quickly became worse. Much worse.

A staff member complained that her office had been robbed of papers relating to a reading scheme she'd been working on. There was no damage, so she had concluded that the thief had entered using a key. Who, apart from the staff member herself, had a key to her office? The head of department had a master key – and at the time that was me.

She wrote a long letter to the Staff Association, accusing me of stealing her research materials. The President of the Newcastle Staff Association forwarded the letter to the headquarters of the Federation of Australian University Staff Associations (FAUSA) in Melbourne, with a covering letter supporting the aggrieved staff member without finding out what I might have to say. FAUSA started preparing a case against me, I was to learn.

But I was up the Hawkesbury River on a houseboat with my sons when her office was entered and the material removed.

Who, then?

Laurie Short was now a Pro Vice-Chancellor, I was Dean, and we needed someone at associate professor level, in a curriculum subject, who would be prepared to have a stint as head of department and also head up our unofficial Curriculum Division. Senate had refused our request to create formal divisions within the department but we decided we would create our own informal divisions anyway. All it needed was the co-operation of the head of department to delegate some of his/her powers to divisional heads.

There was one ideal applicant for the post with whom I had had previous and excellent relations. Although he was in a college of advanced education (CAE), where research was not an expectation, he had a good research record in science education. He entered the interview room dressed in a charcoal grey suit, a white shirt and sober college tie.

Professor Michael Carter, of whom more later, sniggered as soon as he saw him, stage whispering in his characteristic slurring of sibilants, 'Oh God, a CAE type!' Because

of the then climate of academic snobbery that had arisen in reaction to proposals for enforced amalgamations between colleges and universities, Carter's comment swung most of the committee against the candidate. The candidate almost certainly heard, for this usually very fluent speaker didn't interview very well. He later became vice-chancellor at a major Sydney university where he was universally acclaimed for his leadership, particularly in raising the university's research profile, his integrity and his concern for the welfare of both staff and students. This was just one of the many malice-driven blunders to which Carter was prone.

The next candidate was Theo McDonald, a mathematics educator with an impressive CV, including a widely-selling book telling parents how they might help their children learn mathematics. Theo had thick dark curly hair, bending his head as he peered over the bottle-bottom lenses of his horn rim glasses, and scuttled along like a short-sighted racing tortoise. Barking with laughter the while, Theo interviewed very well and entertainingly in his broad French-Canadian accent. Having just returned after only a short stay at the University of the South Pacific, he was asked why he had left Fiji so quickly. His demeanour changed dramatically as he explained that his daughter had been gravely ill and had needed medical attention in Australia. It was the apologetic end of that line of questioning. It was agreed that Theo should be appointed.

The selection committee had met on a Monday, Council met the following Wednesday, when in the normal course of events his appointment would be confirmed. On Tuesday, a maths educator from interstate, whom I'd previously asked for his opinion of Theo, phoned. He apologised for not getting back earlier but the fateful Monday had been a local public holiday. 'Before you appoint our friend, you'd better check him out with people who have worked with him.' He supplied me with three names.

I phoned each one, asking if they would mind if my secretary transcribed the conversations on her extension while we talked. All agreed. All said the same thing. In the exact words of one: 'Don't touch him with a forty-foot barge pole.' And said why in detail, including the fact that Theo's hurried departure from Fiji was because the Fijian Government had declared him *persona non grata* for his political activities – he was ordered to leave and not to return.

I consulted with Alan Barcan who was then head of department. I showed him the transcripts. He agreed immediately that we had to recall the selection committee, which

Don George the VC was very reluctant to do. But when both dean and department head insisted, he could hardly refuse.

I tabled the reports. Carter took one glance, throwing the papers down with *hauteur*: 'I think it highly improper of Professor Biggs to make us privy to such highly damaging material about a future colleague.'

Vive-Principal Tweedie: 'A university should have brilliant eccentrics like Theo, but I'm glad it's not in my department.'

Reyn Keats, an ex-public servant: 'We've been through due procedure. The decision is by definition the right one.'

It was all too much for the final member of the committee: 'Pass.'

Don George: 'Well gentlemen, I know what I'm going to recommend to Council tomorrow. Our decision remains unchanged. The meeting is closed.'

Alan and I – the ones who had to live with the decision – were the only ones who wanted it changed. We were flabbergasted. My guess is that Theo had already been told he'd got the job. To tell him otherwise now would involve too much loss of administrative face. Let it be Education's problem.

I was sorely tempted to resign as dean and publicly say why. I wish I had now. It might have had some impact on an administration that was showing all the signs of galloping dysfunction. It wasn't George so much: he meant well but he was weak. He left most of the decision-making to Carter, who was not weak, who didn't mean well and who's now dead, which explains my candour about him and certain expired others I have been mentioning.

So Theo was appointed and he became head of department. We explained our plan for the department head to delegate to divisional heads. Theo agreed, saying it was a wonderful idea that he thoroughly supported. Here was the fatal flaw: Theo was incapable of delegating. He also had an unfortunate wiring problem: 'no' meant 'no' one day, and 'yes' the next. The result was chaos.

To take just one example, there was the appointment of Director of the Department's Curriculum and Resources Centre. One applicant was not the best qualified and had an unfortunate history of mental illness. Theo, who was a warm-hearted humanist, thought this could be an excellent chance for her rehabilitation. The rest of us thought that very worthy but deemed it unwise to appoint her. We voted by secret ballot.

Theo volunteered to act as poll clerk; he announced that she was the clear choice. We later checked amongst ourselves and realised that Theo had lied. We demanded to see the poll slips.

Barking with laughter, Theo assured us: 'I've destroyed them.'

The appointment was the predictable disaster. She had to be dismissed. She didn't want to go. She chained herself to the banisters. The police had to be called to cut her free and escort her off the premises.

When Theo's term as department head mercifully drew to a close, he was required to hand in the master key, which unlocked all staff offices in the department. He said he'd lost it. He was required to put this in writing. He did: 'Master key lost while swimming.'

I had my suspicions that he hadn't lost it. My room was opposite Theo's. One afternoon, I saw him lurching amiably along the corridor. I pretended to stab wrong keys into the lock of my door.

'Oh Theo,' I called, 'I can't open my door. Must have left my key on the other ring.'

'Nodda worry.' Theo, with a friendly smile, produced a key and unlocked my door.

'Er, Theo, just a minute. Can I have look at that?' I asked, also with a friendly smile.

The key he had produced was stamped 'MK' followed by a serial number. It was the missing master key.

'I think I'd better take that, Theo.' I was dean, if I needed any authority for that highhanded action.

I went to the appropriate person in administration but he refused to do anything about it. He preferred the quiet life. But the mystery of who had raided the staff member's room was solved.

Soon after, Theo went to England on study leave and didn't return.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Since leaving Newcastle, Theo had held posts at Brunel University, London Metropolitan University, and the Human Rights and Social Justice Institute, LMU. He had published widely in a range of subjects including a manual for parents to help their children learn to read (the missing reading scheme?), dyslexia, health education, Cuban politics as an alternative to neoliberalism, and world finance. The erudite but erratic Theo McDonald died on 11th March, 2011.

Chapter 9

Flying SOLO on Study Leave

The *Zeitgeist* was at work in the mid-seventies. My three scale version of the *Study Behaviour Questionnaire* that I'd developed in Canada (p. BBB) gelled with work in progress by Noel Entwistle and his group at Lancaster University, and Ference Marton and his very different group at the University of Gothenburg. Noel used a questionnaire with a different theoretical framework to mine but we were heading in the same direction, while Marton and Saljö developed the idea of 'approaches to learning', which later became central to the work of us all.

When students approach a learning task, they usually do so with one of two intentions: to memorize details in anticipation of questions, or to understand the author's meaning. Depending on their intention, students would then either skim the surface of the text focusing on words and details, or focus on themes and main ideas: 'surface' and 'deep' approaches to learning, respectively, which I thought (but Ference didn't) were very close to my reproducing and internalising dimensions. Lennart Svensson, also from Gothenburg, was interested in study skills, which resembled my organising dimension.

Lancaster and Gothenburg thus sounded like good places to visit, particularly when Noel and Lennart invited me, so off I went in July 1976.

Kevin Collis was a maths educator in my department interested in the work of Edwin Peel, a British psychologist, who described how children at different stages of development handled problems in geography, history and English, amongst other subjects. Kevin had done the same for mathematics.

Kevin suggested that he and I apply for a large Educational Research Development Grant (ERDC), another example of Whitlam largesse, to replicate Peel's work in Australia across the full range of secondary subjects, with Kevin as senior author. I, as head of department, could coordinate the lecturers in the various curriculum subjects – English, history, maths, geography, science, modern languages – and we'd get examples of children's thinking in each subject, at each significant stage of development. Then we'd

compile teachers' manuals in all teaching subjects, which would tell teachers what sorts of performances in their subjects could be expected from children, what were genuine mistakes, and what were typical responses for a child of a particular age.

I wasn't all that wrapped in this. I had my own work to do. It didn't help that several curriculum lecturers didn't want to be coordinated, by me or by anyone else. But it sounded like a good idea and I went along with it as long as Kevin did the dirty work. We hired a research assistant who culled the literature for examples of children's thinking in various subjects and wrote them up in short working papers for each subject. We also got our Dip Ed students to bring in examples of work they picked up during practice teaching.

So while I was overseas visiting Lancaster and Gothenburg, I thought I might as well visit Edwin Peel at the University of Birmingham. He was courtesy itself. After a splendid lunch in the Faculty Club, we repaired to his office. I showed him the working papers we had prepared in Newcastle.

He was dumbfounded. 'Er, er, this is just so similar to what we obtained. It's amazing.'

He was not very friendly after that. It wasn't until I returned to Newcastle and told Kevin about Peel's strange change of attitude that I found out why Peel had reacted so. I'd been showing him his own data as if it was ours.

Apart from some minor stuff our students had gathered, the research assistant in reviewing the literature had culled all the work of Peel and his students, naturally enough as he was the pioneer, but she hadn't specifically referenced Peel's work. Peel must have perceived me as either being monumentally stupid, or as plagiarising his work with the chutzpah of a New York conman.

Not being particularly interested in the study, I hadn't myself checked the literature. I don't know if Kevin had realised this potential problem but I know that if I'd had realised what the research assistant had been doing, my approach to Peel would have been entirely different.

The dangers of a surface approach to doing research.

After that, I felt bound to show Peel and the world that what Kevin and I had been doing was worthy in its own right and different from what Peel himself had been doing. I obtained that opportunity in a surprising way.

In Gothenburg, Lennart Svennson had organised a massive programme for my six days in Sweden. I went to the Department at 8 am and left about 6 pm. In between, I sat in the office of each member of staff trying to display interest while they told me in heavily accented and ponderous English exactly – I mean exactly – what they were doing in their research in science education, in maths education, in attitudes to death, in clinical psychology... I met some nice people, a couple of whom became good friends, but, oh dear, I yearned for six o'clock and a beer, even if it was only the maidenly watered Pripps at three per cent alcohol max.

On my first morning in Gothenburg we were discoursing heavily in the coffee room. *Clomp, clomp, clomp* was heard in the corridor. Conversation ceased. A young man wearing heavy wooden clogs appeared in the doorway. He was dark, thin-faced, with angry, bulging eyes.

He looked at me. 'Moron!' he said in a loud, flat, uninflected voice.

Eh? Excuse me?

'*Moron,*' the others agreed, nodding respectfully.

Someone explained. *Moron* was not an on the spot assessment of my mental level but 'Good morning' in Swedish.

I had just met Ference Marton, whose work was already influencing that of Noel Entwistle and I.

While in Gothenburg I was asked to give seminars on my work. I focused on what I thought we had most in common: the reproducing and internalising dimensions of learning as I called them, and surface and deep approaches to learning as he called them. But Ference wasn't interested in questionnaires; he thought we had nothing in common, not on that score.

However, he was interested in the Peel stuff. In his own work, he described the different outcomes of learning when students used a deep or a surface approach. Students using the deep approach gave much more complex descriptions than students using the surface approach. No surprises there. But looking at the examples (mostly courtesy of Peel) I presented of school students at preoperational, early concrete, late concrete, early formal and late formal levels of development *à la* Piaget, Ference thought that they looked awfully like what adults students had produced on reading an economics text. It struck me

that way too, now he mentioned it. But how could intelligent adults be operating at levels of development appropriate to young children?

It was obvious: they weren't. Peel's work was not about children's levels of *development*, so much as the sophistication of their *learning*.

I left Gothenburg with two important ideas.

The first was that, *pace* Ference, I would call my reproducing and internalising dimensions 'surface' and 'deep' approach, respectively, and the organising scale 'achieving'. Although Marton was talking about what students actually do in a given task, and I was talking about what students said they usually do, the two models were so parallel in their general nature that I thought we should use the same terminology. So I did, as did Noel Entwistle, thereby creating the currency that today is common.

The new terminology was simple, easily understandable, and linked to ongoing work elsewhere. I obtained a research grant to develop two refined versions of the questionnaire: one for use in secondary school (*The Learning Process Questionnaire*) and one for tertiary institutions (*The Study Process Questionnaire*). John Keeves, Director of the Australian Council for Educational Research, allowed me to 'piggy-back' the LPQ on ACER's own tests with ACER samples.⁴⁷ These questionnaires became widely used, particularly in assessing the effectiveness of teaching.

The second idea I took from Gothenburg was that the Peel levels were not about stages of development but descriptions of the levels of complexity gained as students learn. Further, these descriptions were quite general, applying to a variety of subjects. Let me illustrate with hypothetical answers to the question: 'What did you learn from Biggs's academic autobiography?'

1. *Prestructural*. 'About Biggs's academic career.' This tells us nothing we didn't know before.
2. *Unistructural*. 'About how he was a psychology student in Tasmania and how he taught psychology to teachers.' In the right ballpark, but it refers to only one item of information. It's like one-finger typing; it does the job, sort of.

⁴⁷ This work is described in Biggs, J.B. (1987) *Student approaches to learning and studying*. Hawthorn, Vic.: Australian Council for Educational Research.

3. *Multistructural*. ‘About how he was a psychology student in Tasmania and while a student he taught in schools which gave him the idea of a career devoted to applying psychology to education. He did research on arithmetic teaching then taught in education faculties in various countries. He did research on the SOLO taxonomy and on student approaches to learning and ...’ A shopping list, that doesn’t tell a coherent story, although all the details may be right.
4. *Relational*. ‘The story of his academic career. How his research was on disparate topics, such as the SOLO taxonomy, student approaches to learning, the learning of Chinese students. His teaching did not really stem from his research until much later in his career when it all came together with the concept of constructive alignment, which integrated theory and practice ...’ There is a pattern, a theme of integration, but so far this only applies to one academic journey.
5. *Extended abstract*. ‘While this is the story of only one person, it illustrates general features about how teaching and research may be integrated. That in turn is relevant to understanding the ways in which universities have changed over the period of this one person’s career. Extrapolating from that, it may be possible to suggest solutions to the problems currently experienced in higher education.’ Extended abstract learning goes beyond what is immediately given. It allows one to draw generally applicable conclusions.

These five levels describe a cycle of learning that may be applied to learning almost any topic. It can also be used to structure the level of learning required when we teach a topic, as well as assessing how well that level has been achieved. I use it to frame the whole structure of university teaching from curriculum to reporting assessment results.⁴⁸ In short, what Edwin Peel had been doing was indeed different from what I was doing. I only wish he were alive today so that he might revise his quite justifiable opinion that I was outrageously plagiarizing his work.

⁴⁸ Biggs, J.B. (1999) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. Buckingham: Open University Press. 4th edition (2011) co-authored with Catherine Tang, published by Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Education.

On returning to Newcastle after the Peel and Gothenburg visits, I told Kevin the project had changed. We weren't looking at replicating Peel's work on development but at a taxonomy of learning: *The SOLO Taxonomy: The Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome*.

Kevin disagreed. As the senior grant applicant, he could probably see ownership of the project hiving off in ways he hadn't planned. He also thought that while SOLO might apply to some subjects, it didn't apply to mathematics. So we went our separate ways for a while, Kevin describing mathematics in terms of Piagetian levels of development, me describing everything else in terms of SOLO.

John Keats was also interested in Piaget and in Peel's work. One of John's students, Margaret Jurd at Newcastle CAE, had done an excellent PhD on Peel-type research in history. So I sent John a draft of a paper describing SOLO. I thought he might be interested.

We met at a party later. I asked him what he thought of it.

'Very ordinary,' he ground out.

John Keats, thought I, was on the defensive.

Kevin eventually came round – and so too did John – and the final report to ERDC was written, as in the application, with Kevin as senior author.

However, I thought an in-house final report shouldn't be the end of the story. I approached various publishers: Academic Press offered us a publishing contract.⁴⁹ I tried to make my peace with the aggrieved Edwin Peel, by asking him to write the Foreword. He agreed, but when it arrived, the publisher wouldn't use it. The only positive reference he made to our work was to creative writing, a subject Edwin hadn't studied. We had been careful to acknowledge him and his students completely but I guess my original approach to him was still rankling.

1977 was my peak year in Newcastle professionally speaking. Robbie Case from Toronto visited for three weeks. Robbie was a whiz kid: incredibly bright, motivated, and sociable. He developed a theory of development that took into account the Piagetian work and quite different research on working memory, and put it all together to drive an approach to

⁴⁹ Biggs, J. B. & Collis, K. (1982). *Evaluating the quality of learning: The SOLO Taxonomy*. New York: Academic Press.

teaching that enabled children to work at a level of abstraction Piaget – and most other psychologists – would have said was impossible. Tragically, Robbie died of a heart aneurism in May, 2000, aged only 55.

Robbie's main role at Newcastle was to talk to staff about their work, mainly John Kirby and I, and be keynote speaker at a small conference we were organising at Newcastle. The papers ended up as another publication by Academic Press.⁵⁰ Apart from Robbie's contribution, that book is of historical interest in that it contains Kevin Collis's take on Peel's approach applied to maths learning, and my attempt at describing the evolution from Peel to SOLO.

If that's of any interest to anyone apart from myself.

In 1979, I spent a sabbatical at Stanford University. American and Australian/European educational research was then travelling along rather different lines, and still is. American research tended to apply psychology principles top-down, as indeed I had originally intended, but the work on approaches to learning and on SOLO was increasingly bringing me to see that generalisations about learning and teaching seemed to be more effectively created by studying learning, bottom up, in the context of the classroom. I contacted Dick Snow, who was doing internationally recognised work with Lee Cronbach at Stanford on the fit between different aptitudes and different ways of teaching. Dick was happy to sponsor me, and I had a contact with one or two others there. I looked forward to my visit as Stanford's School of Education was generally recognised to be amongst the best in the world, if not the best, and I was interested in this question of our different bottom-up and top-down approaches.

I had four months in Stanford. Dick had a huge grant from the US Navy for a project relating in part to study behaviour, which was where we had thought I might fit in. However, I hadn't realised that Dick himself was on sabbatical, which he was spending at the Stanford think-tank for the behavioural sciences. I didn't see very much of him but I became loosely attached to his team of five, led by a very nice, bright guy, Dan Lohman.

Friday afternoons were brainstorm time. Dick left Dan with a problem that needed dealing with – the next stage of the project, or a glitch that had occurred – and we

⁵⁰ Kirby, John R. & Biggs, John B. (Eds). (1980). *Cognition, development and instruction*. New York: Academic Press.

brainstormed, with the help of a couple of jugs, as they called flagons, of Gallo Hearty Burgundy. I learned how the phenomenal output of the best US universities happened. Not through drinking hearty burgundy, but because top scholars commanded big bucks from unlikely sources such as the US Navy. They could then employ bright guys like Dan and his team who did most of the ongoing work, after the initial conceptualisation and planning by the grant recipient.

Stanford is a very rich privately endowed university, founded by railroad magnate Leland Stanford in 1891. It is very highly selective with 75 per cent of undergraduate classes having 15 or fewer students, while the student-staff ratio is 6.4 to 1. Naturally, Stanford attracted visitors from all over the world; so many that they'd developed a system for coping with them all. I was given a small office in an open area, with a phone plug. If I wanted a phone, I had to get Bell Telephones to install one, at my expense. I didn't.

While walking the corridors, I noticed the name of one assistant professor who had written to me in Newcastle about my work. Delighted at a concrete contact, I knocked on her office door.

'In!'

I inched to see a tanned Californianette staring at me. She had long blond hair, wide mouth, attractive in that drum majorette kind of way.

'Hi! I'm John Biggs. We corresponded recently. I ...'

'Do you have an appointment?'

'Er, no. I was just passing and ...'

'If you wanna talk to me, make an appointment with my secretary.' She turned back to her computer.

I never did get around to making that appointment.

All Stanford academics, like my haughty drum-majorette look-alike, were under incredible pressure to produce high quality papers in prestigious journals to keep Stanford ahead of the UCLA School of Education, with which it was usually level pegging in the annual brownie point calculations. I complained to another visitor, Jerry Burke from Monash, about the incident with my erstwhile contact. Jerry said: 'Didn't they tell you? If you want to find out the latest thinking of any academic here, they don't have time to talk

to you one to one. Attend their graduate classes, they're happy about that. Just don't waste their time by trying to talk to them individually.'

But I was to discover that there was more to it than consuming the precious time of incredibly busy people. I was housed in CERAS, an earthquake proof building with open-area designed offices, constructed with huge floors that would swing in an earthquake. The floors were like enormous partially overlapping shelves, with my office on the third floor/shelf, along with graduate students and other visitors. My office was on the edge of the shelf. On the first and second floor were Stanford staff, including one Nate Gage, a grand old man of research into teaching, who had retired but still had contacts with a few Australian researchers. I could see right into his office from mine. Most of the time he seemed to be reading newspapers. My work wasn't closely related to his at that time – although it certainly would have been twenty years later – but I thought I'd make myself known to him on the strength of the Australian connection. And unlike the others, he didn't seem terribly stressed out.

I knocked on Nate's open door. He smiled cordially. I stood in the doorway, explaining I was from Newcastle, Australia: 'I'm visiting Stanford and I'd like to talk about your work, if you can spare a moment.'

'Oh great. I'm seeing a guy tomorrow. He's also from Newcastle. Why don't you join us? 11 am, my office.' He mentioned the guy's name.

I'd never heard of him. Slightly miffed, I agreed to waste only half the time he would be wasting if he was to speak to me and the other guy separately.

Next day, I turned up at 11 am. We sat, he behind his desk, me in front of it. Silence. Serious conversation was delayed until both visitors were present. It occurred to me that in Stanford breath was as precious a commodity as time.

After a while he spoke. 'Seems like he's late or he's not turning up. Tell you what, John. You go back to your office, and when he turns up, I'll send my secretary to collect you.'

So I sat upstairs, watching Nate read his paper while we both waited. The other Australian didn't turn up. I didn't get to speak to Nate about his work.

In November, Nate was a guest speaker at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research into Education. He returned from Australia a couple of weeks before I was due to leave Stanford. He bumped into me soon after his return.

‘Hi John, I heard some good things about you at the AARE Conference. I’d like to discuss your work with you.’

‘That’d be nice, Nate, but there’s no time now. I’m returning in a couple of days.’
Not quite accurate, but he could get stuffed, I thought.

‘Oh, that’s too bad,’ Nate chuckled. ‘Oh well, I guess you weren’t persistent enough.’

So it wasn’t only a matter of time pressure. I concluded that the probability of having a meaningful conversation with a Stanford academic involved a complex relationship between Time Available, the Persistence of the Visiting Other, and the Subjectively Perceived Importance of the Visiting Other.

Chapter 10

Descent into Chaos: A Case of Institutional Psychosis

In November, 1986, journalist David Clark out-topped the growing concerns of several worried academics at the University of Newcastle with the following alarming article:⁵¹

Do we really need more than the 19 universities we have already – or fewer but better ones? Take, for example, the University of Newcastle. Currently it is plagued with the following problems:

- Allegations that members of the Commerce Faculty used the university's tax-exempt status to operate a tax avoidance scheme for their personal benefit.
- Friction between the community and the university over academic "moonlighting" and concern from many academics that academic standards are declining as a result.
- Intervention by the Governor of NSW, Sir James Rowland, who is Visitor of the University, after an Associate Professor called for an investigation of the administration's handling of a dispute over a student's thesis.
- A long running dispute involving a former member of the Department of Commerce, Dr. Michael Spautz, who alleged in 1979 that the then head of the department was guilty of plagiarism ...
- A decision to build a \$0.5million new Council/Senate chamber at a time when the university has staffing problems and departments are facing cuts in teaching funds.
- Demands that the University Council be dismissed ...
- Suggestions that the Newcastle CAE and the University be amalgamated. The CAE staff are keen to be transformed into university lecturers but in the light of the above surely there is a case for subsuming the University of Newcastle into the Newcastle CAE

This incredible ragbag of concerns suggests that the university should at least be the subject of a wide-ranging external Inquiry – with one of the options deserving serious consideration being its closure

⁵¹ David Clark, 'Taxpayers are supporting quantity, not quality academic institutions.' *The Australian Financial Review*, 3 November, 1986.

This ‘incredible ragbag of concerns’ had its origins in the late seventies, when Professor Eddie Richardson was appointed Principal of the Newcastle College of Advanced Education (NCAE). He built a house next door to an old lady who kept a dog. The dog regularly relieved itself on Eddie’s lawn. Eddie duly cleaned it up. When he had obtained a sugar bag full of dog turds, he went next door and rang the doorbell.

The lady answered.

‘Yours, I believe,’ said Eddie, with his characteristic leer. He stepped into her front hallway and emptied the bag onto her floor.

I mention this little story because it neatly sums up both the character of Eddie Richardson (who died some years ago), and the quality of the politics of higher education in the Hunter Valley.

Eddie tried to empty more than dog turds in the hallways of the University of Newcastle when an enforced amalgamation between the University and NCAE was mooted by the Fraser Government in 1981. Amalgamation had been on the cards since 1971. Had it happened at that time, everything almost certainly would have worked out okay. But it didn’t happen, because many university academics, especially including those still remaining from Newcastle Technical College days, felt that an amalgamation would be *infra dig*: letting the side down, type of thing. The NCAE staff, just across the creek from the University, felt a simmering hurt at this elitism. Simmering hurt was meat and drink to Eddie. He marshalled his forces and tried to sabotage previously agreed forms of cooperation between the College and the University. For example, the College had been awarded a Centre for Special Education, on condition it was shared with the University. Eddie cancelled the agreement, to the detriment of much cooperative teaching and research that had been ongoing between the College and the University. This, and many other examples, stoked old enmities between the two institutions.

Ross Telfer, who was a good friend of mine and a co-author, was on the CAE staff and had accepted a post at the University. On his last day at the CAE, Ross made a courtesy call on Richardson. He began: ‘Dr Richardson, I just wanted to say....’

‘Out of here!’ Richardson shouted.

Word of Eddie's nastiness had reached the ears of the State Minister of Education, who was responsible for the college sector. The Minister decided to reconstitute the NCAE Council, with more university people on it. He asked me, as a professor of education, to be a member. His secretary first sounded me out, as he did the other new appointees. Would I be willing to adopt a watchful role of the College administration? Which being interpreted meant: Are you willing to try to keep that mad bastard Richardson under control, for God's sake?

Indeed I was. After many frustrating experiences, this was just what I wanted to hear.

But in 1981, soon after the restructuring of the NCAE Council, the Fraser Liberal Government's Razor Gang ordered the amalgamation between NCAE and the University, and the agenda suddenly rotated 180°. Newcastle was Labor's heartland, so the CAE under state control must now get the better of the University, which was under the control of the Federal Tertiary Education Commission. A majority of members of the Labor-dominated CAE Council, handpicked to sit on Eddie, were suddenly his best mates, united against the elitist university enemy across the creek. These people, many with a union background, were street fighters. I could see that the University would soon be outmanoeuvred so I decided to keep Vice-Chancellor Don George abreast of what was happening. He thought I should not.

'You,' he opined, 'are on NCAE Council in your own right, not as a University representative. I do not wish you to apprise me of their business.'

I thought I'd been appointed precisely by virtue of my position, but there you go. Evidently, Don didn't want to be told about decisions that held much potential damage for the university, such as the sudden splurge in NCAE staffing at senior and expensive levels, or about the cunningly designed financial Trojan horse whereby NCAE's deficit of over one million dollars would be hidden by long-service leave funds. A new amalgamated institution would soon find itself with a very large and unexpected long term debt. Eddie also designed an 'equal-partners' institution with a new charter giving Eddie vice-chancellorial status in an institution that would be renamed 'The Southern Hunter Institute of Technology', with its self-fulfilling acronym.

These dire happenings did not in the event transpire, but I'd had enough. I had better things to do than fight the University's fight without the University's support. I resigned from the NCAE Council. But that was not the end of my tribulation.

Not by a long chalk.

Prior to his appointment as vice-chancellor in 1975, Don George had been Professor of Engineering at the University of Sydney, and a leading light in FAUSA, the academic professional body. His was a popular appointment, but soon afterwards he took on honorary positions with the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok and with the Australian Atomic Energy Commission. He was frequently off-campus, thereby creating a power vacuum.

Interventionists abhor power vacuums and Professor of Sociology, Mick Carter, was an interventionist. He was elected to the powerful post of Deputy Chairman of Senate, intended as a once-only three year incumbency so it could be spread around the senior academic staff. But Mick was re-elected, not only once but twice. As we lurched from crisis to crisis over amalgamation and financial problems, Mick, in the ringing Thatcherite rhetoric of pain, enjoined us: 'Bite the bullet! Tighten the belt!' And as each election of the Deputy Chairmanship drew nigh: 'We must have continuity of leadership in these desperate times! Re-elect me!' It's an old political trick and it worked every time. 'Yes,' echoed members of Senate, 'we must re-elect Mick Carter!' Whose own girth, be it noted, was if anything wider than at the previous election, his own teeth unworn by bullet biting.

It was Education's belt and teeth he had in mind. In 1982, Mick introduced his 'academic plan', involving 'long term cost-cutting measures' in the October Senate meeting. To the amazed consternation of myself and Ross Telfer, then Head of the Department of Education while I was Dean, the cost-cutting measures were to be brought about by eliminating undergraduate courses in Education. Just like that, without any consultation at all. Ross and I looked at each other; we had the same thought. We walked out in protest, me announcing somewhat rashly: 'If this goes through, it would be the beginning of the end of Education at this University.'

My parting shot was relayed to Jane-Ann Lee, education reporter for the *Newcastle Herald*. I must say I wasn't comfortable about being quoted as predicting the

downfall of my own faculty. Such predictions tend to become self-fulfilling. However, Jane-Ann was sympathetic, gave my alternative plan for cost-cutting a good airing, which principally ‘involved holding academic staff to their conditions of employment.’⁵² I strongly believe in academic tenure, but I also believe that it carries with it responsibilities for doing what it is that tenure is designed to protect: to teach and to carry out research without fear or favour. Those who were not teaching properly, or not doing any research, had to my mind broken their side of the academic contract. They had no right to tenure. Simple as that. Clearing out the deadwood would have solved all our financial problems with no tightening of belts for those who were doing their job. But this was a bullet George and Carter were not prepared to bite.

Half the students across the University went on strike in support of Education’s undergraduate courses, thus forcing administration to back down.

But Mick hadn’t given up on us as we were to discover.

In mid-1976 I gave a paper at the Newcastle Branch of the Australian Psychological Society, in which I’d made a passing reference to American psychologist Arthur Jensen’s theory about racial differences in intelligence. After the meeting, a figure loomed out of the dark as I unlocked my car.

‘Hey, I liked it you mentioned Jensen,’ it said in rapid-fire American. ‘You got shot for even mentioning his name at San Francisco State. Yes sir, I’m sure glad to get away from Nixon and his goddam liberals.’

I had just met Mike Spautz, who preferred the ideological climate of Newcastle to that created by that notorious left-wing crazy, President Richard Nixon.

Spautz was a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Commerce. In 1977, Alan Williams was appointed Professor of Commerce, having only recently completed his PhD. Spautz studied Williams’ thesis. He deemed it not only slight in itself, but he concluded that sections were plagiarized. He thought Williams was therefore unfit to hold the chair, so he informed Williams that if he didn’t resign, he would ‘blanket the campus like snow’ with evidence of the alleged plagiarism. Williams didn’t resign. Spautz demanded that administration dismiss Williams. Administration ignored him.

⁵² *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 19 October, 1982. Jane-Ann Lee, ‘An academic plan’s stormy path’.

Spautz blanketed the campus as promised with evidence of the alleged plagiarism and regularly circulated his bulletin, *In Vita Veritas*, in which he attacked what he asserted was the cowardice of senior University administrators and Council members.

The administration couldn't ignore this. Mick Carter was appointed chairman of a committee to investigate this unsavoury matter and report to Council. Council expressed their confidence in Williams and ordered Spautz to stop his campaign. He didn't stop, so in May 1980 they sacked Spautz for refusing to obey the committee's order. This was exactly the ground, failure to obey an order, that Professor Sydney Sparkes Orr had in 1955 been sacked from the University of Tasmania. Following the Orr Case, the Federated Association of Universities of Australia (FAUSA) had successfully challenged that ground for dismissal in the courts, as it assumed a 'master-servant' relationship between a tenured academic and a university council. Dismissing Spautz on this ground was therefore inadmissible. Further, those involved in dismissing him were biased against him, as he had named them as defendants in libel suits.

Spautz had been handed the grounds for a wrongful dismissal suit on a plate. But instead of pursuing that, he chose instead to pursue his string of libel suits against the Chancellor (Sir Bede Callaghan), George, Carter and several others, including Justice Michael Kirby who was a Council member. He lost them all and was gaoled when he refused to pay costs. He also lost the wrongful dismissal case. He had defended himself, so it was the word of this gibbering motor-mouth against that of the plausible and urbane Professor Carter.

Unfortunately, Motor-Mouth was right and the urbane professor was wrong. Years later, in 1996, it was admitted that Spautz had been wrongfully imprisoned and was awarded \$75,000 damages in compensation – but his dismissal held.

Coral Bayley-Jones was a doctoral student in the Geography Department, with Associate Professor Don Parkes as her supervisor.⁵³ In October 1984 he submitted a report to the Doctoral Degree Committee outlining several problems with her thesis, related to data collection and processing: she had refused to replicate analyses that were not undertaken during her Newcastle candidacy. Her sampling methods were

⁵³ Parkes wrote a detailed account of this case in *Doctored!* available at <http://www.bmartin.cc/dissent/documents/Parkes11.pdf>

unsatisfactory and surveys claimed to have been undertaken by her could not be properly explained and some dates given for overseas surveys were clearly impossible. Carter, as chairman of the Doctoral Degree Committee, refused to acknowledge these problems, at which Parkes resigned as supervisor in protest. Carter thereupon appointed himself supervisor: never mind that he was a sociologist and the thesis was in geography. However, as Carter and Bayley-Jones were neighbours for a while in the suburb of Merewether, there was every opportunity for a meeting of minds of over their differing disciplinary perspectives. Her thesis went out for examination.

Parkes prepared a more detailed report supporting his claims, including the receipt of information from the vice-chancellor at Loughborough University in the UK that she had been enrolled for the same thesis as she was supposed to be doing at Newcastle. This led to appointment of a Council committee of inquiry in August 1985, chaired by Professor Laurie Short, which supported Parkes's claims. Bayley-Jones then used a strategy that at Newcastle – and elsewhere – had worked for her every time: she threatened legal action. The Short Report was shortened terminally on the advice of the University's solicitors. Parkes appealed to the Visitor to the University, Sir James Rowland, who also supported Parkes' claims and ordered the University to stop the examining of Bayley-Jones's thesis. George had by now retired but the new Vice-Chancellor, Keith Morgan, briefed by Carter, urged Senate to vote *against* accepting the Visitor's direction to stop the examining, and to accept the examiners' reports.

But acting directly contrary to the Visitor's ruling was illegal. When this was finally realised, Bayley-Jones' candidature was terminated on the grounds of invalid enrolment. But the University lawyers had already advised that her enrolment *was* valid and had thoughtfully provided Bayley-Jones' lawyers with this opinion. It was a gift for Bayley-Jones. She too appealed to the Visitor, now Sir David Martin, who ruled that her enrolment was indeed valid but that the university must now reconsider the precise ground for her termination for the reasons given by his predecessor: breaches of university regulations. That was ignored by the University. However, he recommended that she receive a 'solatium' – a solace – of \$6,000 for being so inconvenienced. Enraged, she went to the Supreme Court where she was awarded a sum of \$150,000 inclusive of costs in an out-of-court settlement. The University decided that her thesis should thus be back on course. Ignoring Parkes' original problems with her thesis and

her enrolment – and that Council had already accepted in the Short Report – the University ordered yet another supervisor and another set of examiners, two of whom failed the thesis, as did the Doctoral Committee. However that last Committee's decision of 'fail' was over-ridden by the Senate Doctoral Review Committee who recommended to Council that the degree be awarded. She was awarded the degree in 1995.

Bayley-Jones died in January 2002. Through his lawyers, Parkes demanded that the degree be revoked. The University refused for fear of legal action – presumably from the grave – but in 2005 Parkes did receive an unreserved apology from the University including an agreement that the thesis would never be available for reference and must be kept for all time in the care of the vice-chancellor. Parkes thought these conditions were a clear admission that the University actually agreed that the thesis was fraudulent but still would not admit that it should be revoked. In that case, Parkes argued, a degree from the University of Newcastle was not worth having.

Parkes had a masters and a doctorate from Newcastle, which he rejected sending his degree certificates back to the University Council. The Council refused to accept them. In a specially convened public seminar at the University, which the University insisted in videotaping, Parkes gave a detailed, documented account of the University's failings in handling the Bayley-Jones case. At the conclusion of which, he publicly tore up his degree certificates.⁵⁴ Parkes in turn demanded that her degree be withdrawn posthumously and when no action was taken, published the full unvarnished account of the story from the beginning to its incredible end in *Doctored!*⁵⁵

The University of Newcastle was again in legal trouble for covering up plagiarism. In 2003, an external examiner found that the assignments of 15 international students, doing a Newcastle MBA, had been plagiarised and accordingly failed them, pointing out the sources that had been used by the students. However, his marks were whited out within the department concerned and the papers re-marked internally; one student, failed by the external examiner, was awarded nearly full marks. The external examiner

⁵⁴ 'Angry academic destroys degrees,' *The Newcastle Herald*, 22 August, 2003 'Angry academic destroys degrees,' *The Newcastle Herald*, 22 August, 2003.

⁵⁵ *Doctored!* may be downloaded from: <http://www.bmartin.cc/dissent/documents/Parkes11.pdf> Free hard copies are available from the author while stocks last at dnp@idl.com.au .

found out and blew the whistle. The University immediately went into denial, refusing to admit that any wrong doing had been done.

An inquiry was conducted by the St. James Ethics Centre in 2003. The Centre reported that the University had inconsistent definitions of plagiarism and poor procedures for investigating it, but didn't consider that senior management had covered up. Soon after their report was received, however, both Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor resigned, denying any connection between the report and their resignations.⁵⁶ A couple of months later, a Deputy Vice-Chancellor resigned because, it seemed, he had advised applicants for research funding that they needn't acknowledge their students even when the application was essentially the students' brainchild.

In 2002, microbiologist Dr. Michelle Adams was principal supervisor of an honours student's dissertation, with two other supervisors. In 2003, the other two supervisors published the students' work without either the student's or Adams' knowledge. When Adams discovered this by accident, both she and the student were excluded from any publication to do with the dissertation. Adams officially raised the issue of plagiarism, and afterwards was 'treated like a leper', as she put it, frozen out of communication with colleagues, bullied in meetings and given conflicting instructions by her department head. The hostility got so bad she was afraid to enter the staffroom. She became badly depressed, took medication and even contemplated suicide. Eventually, she was dismissed for inability to carry out her job – but the university did agree to cover her medical costs. She took her case to the Workers' Compensation Committee and nearly three years later received \$60,000 compensation for pain and suffering, and for legal, medical and other costs incurred.

Adams wasn't the only one in recent times to complain of bullying, yet Vice-Chancellor Nick Saunders said he did not believe bullying or harassment was a problem at the institution – but he did confirm that 57 complaints were investigated in 2009.⁵⁷ The situation became so bad a blog has been set up 'Stop Bullying at the University of Newcastle'.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ The St. James Report and the University's reply can be seen at:

http://www.newcastle.edu.au/services/committees/council/academic_integrity

⁵⁷ Donna Page, 'Newcastle uni bully claims: Academic says harassment led to illness.' *Newcastle Herald*, 17 March, 2010,

⁵⁸ <http://stop-b-uon.blogspot.com/>

In short, the University of Newcastle has been involved in malpractice and cover up for over 30 years. Is it possible for institutions to become psychotic, independently of who is running them? It would seem so. The Bayley-Jones and Spautz cases could be traced essentially to the malice and poor judgment of one person, Mick Carter, but years after he had left, three or four Vice-Chancellors down the track, the University was still making the same or very similar mistakes. A culture of bullying, lying and cover-up had become endemic to the institution.

And then it was my turn.

March 1986 was the deadline for the second edition of my educational psychology text, *Process of Learning*. Ross Telfer, my co-author, was having serious health problems. But Carter was revving up for his second crack at Education, and I was going through domestic difficulties that were not unrelated to the stress created thereby. Drastic measures were called for if I was to meet the publishing schedule.

I set aside the January-February vacation to be devoted exclusively for preparing the new edition of the textbook. I saw my doctor for a biochemical set of crutches: catovit as the upper to allow me to concentrate during the day, and euhypos as the downer so I could sleep at night. Catovit is an amphetamine-like substance, promoted 'for patients running on empty', as the drug company's blurb put it. It has since been withdrawn and I'm not surprised.

My dialectic of pharmaceutical opposites saw that I made the deadline okay, but what was not okay were the effects that catovit had. It left a most unpleasant, metallic chemical taste in my mouth, and a strange buzzing reaction in my feet that occurred when under stress. And the politics of the university ensured that I was continually under stress.

I consulted a psychiatrist, who put me on doxepin, a tricyclic antidepressant, which fixed the buzzing. She told me I had become obsessive about the University: it wasn't my duty 'to make the world clean again after the wrong doing of others', as she kindly put it. She impressed upon me that I couldn't fight full-scale battles on two fronts, home and university. I was entitled to some joy in life.

Joy. Oh yes, I remembered that feeling. In Canada, wasn't it? That was a *long* time ago. But joy not yet. The Psalmist said: 'Heaviness may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning'.

It was to be a long, long night.

Don George was due to retire in 1986. He saw his place in history as He Who Saved the University from Amalgamation. Excuse me? What amalgamation? That hadn't been an issue since 1981.

George was convinced, with Mick Carter's mischievous help, that 'our lords and masters in Canberra', as George put it, wanted the University to hand over the graduate Diploma in Education course to the College: 'rationalisation' he called it. In secret talks with the CAE, to which the Faculty of Education was not privy, a deal was struck. Our Diploma in Education, in numbers our most important programme, was to be traded for five master's courses involving trade subjects, for which we didn't have the staff and the College did, the courses to be offered externally, which we weren't empowered to teach and the College was. The Department of Education stood to lose over half its staff, while eight or nine other departments in the Faculties of Arts and Science stood to lose a steady flow-through of some hundred or so students who would be headed for the Dip Ed after they graduated. From the University's point of view, the scheme was self-destructive lunacy – another symptom, surely, of institutional psychosis. Eddie and his mates at the College couldn't believe their luck.

George announced this decision to trade our Dip Ed for those unteachable masters' courses at a Planning Committee in September 1986, yet again with no warning or consultation with me as Dean and Ross Telfer as Head. The proposal was to go to Senate in three weeks, to be passed to the October Council meeting, there to become official University policy.

An unfortunate side effect of my medication was that it dried my mouth and throat. Not the best thing when I had to attend meetings and plead cases with passion. But it did have its advantages. I rallied the students and my voice kept breaking; the students thought that I was on the verge of tears. That set some of them crying for our faculty. The Faculty of Education rallied, unanimously for a change, passing two resolutions for Senate to endorse: (1) expressing grave concern at the way the matter

had been handled, especially the appalling lack of consultation, (2) requesting the proposals be withdrawn and alternatives explored.

At Senate, I arrived early to get a seat at the back and side, from where I could command the whole room with eye contact, chewing sweets to keep my mouth moist, I argued our case. Senate agreed with both resolutions by a large margin. Council was to meet two weeks later. However, the University Council had recently been reconstituted in the mirror image of the reconstitution of NCAE Council some years back. That is, the University Council was now stacked with NCAE sympathisers, including senior NCAE administrators and the Chairman of the CAE Council.

And we had reckoned without Mick Carter. As Deputy Chairman of Senate, his job was to represent Senate's views on Council and to move and speak to Senate's motions (see p. ZZZ). Carter refused to do so. The Council member representing the Staff Association, Don Wright, did so instead, which another Council member saw as 'provocative'. Another member remarked that the matter of the Dip Ed 'was beyond the wit of Senate' and yet another opined that 'If Council is headed for a confrontation with Senate, then so be it.' Carter had anticipated with admirable prescience the corporatisation of universities by some ten years. In his characteristic spray of salivary sibilants, turning 's' into 'sh', he told Council: 'University Councils over all the Western world are assuming more power, precisely because the Senates find it impossible to make the hard decisions.' But this is exactly what went wrong in Tasmania forty years earlier. It is also where many of our current problems derive, as we shall see in Chapter 17.

I asked to be present at the Council meeting to state Education's case, to which the Chancellor, Sir Bede Callaghan, agreed. I summarised the substance of our case, drawing Council's attention to the constitutional problem.

The Senate motions...put Council and Senate on a collision course. The Senate has adopted a clear position on certain academic matters: the nature and structure of masters degrees, the question of consultation with departments, and the question of whether the University of Newcastle will continue to offer preservice teacher education ...

If Council endorses the present proposal ... it will precipitate a profound crisis in the government of the university. The only parallel I can think of is the Tasmanian

situation, which in 1954 led to a Royal Commission which found for the senior academic body (Senate), and which in turn led to the agonising of the Orr Case.

This University must avoid such a humiliating and costly outcome...

The Council did no such thing. They didn't care that this was the question that had sparked the Tasmanian Royal Commission: Who should make the academic decisions, the lay Council, or the academic body, the Senate? To them it was obvious: *We* make the decisions. The academics' own voice had told them so. Mick Carter had betrayed his own Senate. Council rejected Senate's recommendations, although only by two votes.

Sitting in my room a few days later, I was certain I was heading for a heart attack. My pulse was racing 160 beats to the minute. But it gradually slowed, a check confirmed there was nothing wrong with my heart. It was a standard panic attack that sometimes happens under prolonged stress.

I wasn't prepared to fight again in Senate, but my old friendly enemy John Keats was, and so was the charmingly eccentric Godfrey Tanner. John moved, Godfrey seconding, that Senate's original position be maintained. The motion was put and passed. Senate still wanted the Dip Ed.

After the Standing Committee meeting the day before that second Senate meeting, Professor John Hamilton from Medicine took me aside.

'What are you going to say tomorrow? I've a meeting in Town and can't make Senate. I'd just like to know how things might go.'

Stupidly honest, I replied: 'Well, however the vote goes on the Dip Ed, Senate has problems, which should be raised. One is the role of the Deputy Chairman. He's clearly not fulfilling the role he's elected to carry out. I think we have a structural crisis.'

'Are you going to move a no confidence motion?'

'No. We don't need to go that far. But we do need to discuss the structural problem.'

Sitting down at the meeting next afternoon, I discovered with unease that Hamilton was sitting opposite me. He had decided not to go to his meeting.

After the Keats-Tanner motion had passed, I raised the constitutional issues. I said that Senate had been deprived of its intended advocate on Council. I continued:

‘We appear to be run by an oligarchy, the same faces are on almost every important committee in the University. The same mistakes keep recurring.’

I began to recite the mistakes, including the Spautz and Bayley-Jones cases and the sorts of things that David Clark had listed, as outlined at the head of this chapter.

Hamilton interrupted. ‘It sounds like Professor Biggs is about to move a vote of no confidence.’

‘No, I am not. As I told Professor Hamilton yesterday, I think these are matters that Senate needs to discuss ...’

‘Let’s be quite clear about it then. I hereby move a vote of *confidence* in the Deputy Chairman.’

‘With acclamation!’ shouted Professor Clarke, sitting beside Hamilton and from the same faculty. Clarke stood, clapping loudly.

Slowly Senate stood – except for two members, the other one being Carter – and with acclamation expressed its confidence in its representative on Council for his refusal to represent Senate on Council.

It was time for me to go. And I’m glad to say that other academics thought it was time for them to go too.⁵⁹

Before I left, I wrote in *Opus*, the student paper:

...the whole thing about being an academic is ‘publishing’ – literally ‘going public’ – on what you perceive to be the truth, and why. If you believe something is wrong, there are two ways to go. One is to close ranks for the sake of form...The other is to speak out, because that way something might be done about it. ...

It’s basic: if academics are too afraid to say it as they see it on academic matters, they can’t call themselves academics. Because Professor Orr went public in Tasmania all those years ago, there was a Royal Commission into the University, which eventually led to the righting of institutional wrongs. So I went public to let the world know that bad things were going on at Newcastle, naively hoping they might be

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Potter, ‘University professor resigns post in protest: Too much “political interference” to do job properly.’ *The Newcastle Morning Herald*, March 19, 1987. That same issue of the *Herald* reported the resignations of several senior staff, about which the editorial commented: ‘The drain of distinguished academics reported this week may not be worrying everyone at the University of Newcastle, but it should. Good academics ... tend to grow roots where they believe they have achieved a position of quality in their disciplines. So when a drift is observed, the aspect of quality needs to be looked at ...’

righted. As I said in an interview with *The Australian*: ‘the root of the problem is the university’s structure... it is an oligarchy.’⁶⁰

What really got to me was that colleagues frequently agreed with me in private *but wouldn’t say so publicly*. Had they stood up to be counted it’s possible some problems might have been rectified. Today, with many academic staff on contract and with tenure rules more fragile, academics are even more afraid to speak out than they were then: today’s universities are indeed oligarchies.

Possibly Godfrey Tanner had stinted in pouring his libations to sanctify the ground of the new University back in 1965, or the wine might have been corked, but for whatever reason the gods had clearly abandoned the University of Newcastle. And so would I.

I applied for every professorial job in sight. The first to make an offer was the University of Hong Kong. Hong Kong it was: and what a blessing that turned out to be.

Eventually.

⁶⁰ See Christopher Dawson, ‘Newcastle run like an oligarchy: professor’ *The Australian Higher Education*, 26 August, 1987. I was prophetic. As I discuss in Chapter 17, oligarchy is precisely the structure of the modern corporatised university.

Chapter 11

A Bad Mistake? The University of Hong Kong

I was driving a large bus along a sandy rutted track, criss-crossed with other tracks, none of which were signposted. The bus was packed with quarrelling passengers, the steering was heavy and unresponsive. It was night, it was raining and a heavy fog had descended. Suddenly I saw a signpost in the headlights. I tried to read it but the writing was indistinct.

But I wasn't driving a bus. I was chairing my first meeting of the Advanced Studies Committee since taking up the post as Professor of Education at the University of Hong Kong.

'Ah,' I thought I'd got it. 'So the students don't actually know their marks. Have I got that right?'

'You have,' the dean replied.

'But that's outrageous. We'll have to change that.'

'Can't. It's a ruling by Senate.'

'Well, we'll have to take it back to Senate.'

'I think you'll find it very difficult to get any support from this faculty,' the dean informed me coldly.

I forced a light laugh. 'There may not be many unequivocal findings from educational research, but one of them is that knowledge of results is basic to improving performance. Surely that's our business as an Education Faculty?'

The dean returned my light laugh. 'If we gave students their results, they'd all beat a track to our office doors arguing for better marks. Life would be impossible.'

'I've been teaching in three universities before I came here. You get the odd one or two students who argue about their marks, but that's all in my experience. Anyway, justifying our decisions to students is part of our job.'

'You don't know these people. These students would never leave you alone.'

'But what about their civil rights? Isn't it the students' *right* to know their assessment results?'

‘You’re in Hong Kong, a colony. There are no civil rights here’

My bus had driven itself into the plot of a B-grade melodrama. And as happens in B-grade melodramas, a cold shiver ran up this driver’s spine.

Two weeks later, a two weeks involving more opening-of-eye and chilling-of-spine, I was walking up the Sun Yat Sen steps from the Knowles Building to the Shaw Buildings where the Faculty of Education was housed. Halfway up, I stopped. One of those moments-of-truth had suddenly hit me.

I had made a bad, *bad* mistake in coming to Hong Kong.

Hong Kong letter boxes might have been a royal red at that time, and the Union Jack everywhere on display, but 97 per cent of the population of Hong Kong were not only ethnically Chinese but in many ways more traditionally Chinese than the Mainland Chinese themselves. Most Hong Kongers or their parents had fled a government espousing an Eastern European philosophy that had done its best to crush ‘The Four Olds’, that is, anything to do with traditional customs and beliefs. Scratch the British skin of Hong Kong and rich Chinese blood flowed. Most expats accordingly didn’t mix with Chinese socially or bother to learn Cantonese. They formed their own ghettos: they belonged to the Royal Yacht Club and, if they queued up for long enough, to the exclusive Hong Kong Cricket Club.

Yet the Brits fitted into Hong Kong in a way we Aussie expats did not. The Chinese are a collectivist society, where the common good is perceived to be more important than individual rights, a point I had learned on that matter of revealing exam marks – although in that case the common good was that of the expats. Chinese are also high on ‘power-distance’: they are strongly aware of who has the power in the social structure and of the distance between themselves and those persons; they give them respect according to that distance. Brits are also high on power-distance. When my predecessor, Alan Brimer, entered the staffroom, so I was told, all conversation ceased; all eyes, of whatever ethnicity, turned respectfully to him, waiting for him to lead the conversation where he wished to take it. Australians tend to be low on power-distance. To emphasise that, we call senior politicians or business leaders by their given names. We pretend we’re all great mates, calling them John or Kevin or Julia even while they are in the very act of emptying their bowels on us.

Why did expatriates come to Hong Kong? The Brits had different reasons than expats from other countries. As British nationals in a British Colony, Brits had the right to come and go as they pleased. Writer Simon Winchester, himself a Brit, captured one kind of British expatriate with his FILTH acronym: **F**ailed **I**n **L**ondon **T**rying **H**ong **K**ong (we're talking pre-1997, before the Territory was handed back to Mainland China). I met plenty of that kind of expat in tertiary institutions, not excluding the University of Hong Kong. Other nationalities, including Australians, had to acquire a working visa, an employer's statement, an identity card and suchlike.

Barry Humphries was interested in why Australians came to Hong Kong. He asked two questions of his expatriate compatriots:

1. What's your racket?

And in the event of a negative response, which I for one would give:

2. So what are you running from?

That's me. I was running away from that grotesque circus otherwise known as the University of Newcastle.

But when I was being interviewed for the Hong Kong post, I became aware of the delights that Hong Kong had to offer. Here was the food city of the world, with its annual Festival of the Arts, its Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra which was and is world famous, and – amazingly – bushwalking. The staff quarters were half an hour's jog to the Peak where, as I had then discovered, the views over the University, Western District and the Harbour were, well, overwhelming. Here was a place with wonderful things to offer, I had thought. I was yet to discover the walking in the New Territories: over mountains, into rustic villages, to beaches where Brahmin cows lazed contentedly, and that I would find to be so beautiful, enriching and soul-healing.

Another thing on offer was the pay. I won't go into the details except to say that rental of the beautifully situated staff quarters, with stunning views over the Lamma Channel and to Lantau Island, was 7½ per cent of salary, and income tax for my salary was a flat 15 per cent. I had a moral problem with the latter, given my outrage a few years previously when extreme right-winger, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, stood for prime minister of Australia on the platform of a flat tax of 25 per cent. I could only conclude that I'd just have to put up with that 15 per cent tax rate and suffer.

So a possibility of coming to Hong Kong that Barry Humphries hadn't mentioned was the Good Life.

But there was a downside. Academically, Hong Kong was far from where we Western researchers thought the action was. I had even said to Newcastle friends: 'We'll have a great time no doubt, but I'm probably committing professional suicide.'⁶¹ I wasn't interested in the sort of research Hong Kong naturally offered, such as research into Chinese studies, comparative education, teaching and learning in a second language, and so on. I was interested in the conditions for quality learning in schools and universities, and I had thought that I wasn't likely to find such conditions in Hong Kong schools, where classes contained forty students and more, where discipline was fierce, teaching methods were all chalk and talk (and because of traffic noise, the talk was often through a PA system inside the classroom), and teaching and student learning were distorted by rigid and ruthless examining.

And my job was to help prepare teachers to teach in such a system. I'd faced that dilemma when I went to Newcastle (p. XXXX), but in Hong Kong the gap between my educational philosophy and what was happening on the ground seemed far wider. In fact, soon after I had arrived, I remarked in a black moment to an academic sitting beside me on the staff bus: 'I'm philosophically at odds with what I'm supposed to be doing here.' She thought that an intolerable position to be in. And so, for a while, did I.

I calculated that I could take early retirement at age 55, three years away. But on the 19th of October 1987 the stock market crashed, taking with it enough of my rolled over superannuation from Newcastle to make that no longer an option.

So it had to be the Good Life and that morally enervating fifteen per cent tax rate.

The University of Hong Kong, the oldest tertiary institution in Hong Kong, was officially opened in 1912 with the Faculty of Medicine, which had evolved from the Hong Kong College of Medicine, founded in 1887. Of the College's early alumni, the most renowned was Dr Sun Yat-sen, the founder of modern China. The Faculties of Engineering and Arts were established within a year of the official opening. Teacher training was originally

⁶¹ Just to indicate how wildly wrong that assessment was, the University of Hong Kong today ranks 22nd in the world, ahead of any Australian university (see p. XXX).

offered in 1917 through the Faculty of Arts, giving rise to the Department of Education in 1951, which offered the Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PCEd, the equivalent to the Australian Dip Ed) for graduates of the University. When Alan Brimer, whom I knew from Skepparholmen days (p. XXX), was appointed Professor of Education he turned the department into an autonomous School of Education, offering postgraduate programs for the first time.

In 1984, the School became the Faculty of Education, with an elected dean rather than an appointed head. The faculty comprised two departments, Education and Curriculum Studies, to which Speech and Hearing Sciences was added in 1988. As Brimer had reached the compulsory retiring age, Brian Cooke, Professor and Head of Curriculum Studies stood for dean, as did Paul Morris, a senior lecturer who declared his candidature on the grounds – familiar to me from Newcastle days – that professors had too much power. Paul was elected. He saw the Faculty as the place where all the important decisions were to be made, as had been the case in the days of the School of Education. Professorial department heads were to be kept in their place.

Months before I arrived, Professor Eric Hoyle from Bristol was invited to chair a review of the Department of Education. Soon after I had arrived, Hoyle made his report. Some of his recommendations I could agree with, but others, such as on staffing appointments to particular areas, I could not. I thought that the balance of staffing for a department is one that should be decided internally, by the head in particular, not by some outsider in consultation with a different department, Curriculum Studies. I felt slighted; important decisions affecting the direction of the department had been made before the new head could influence them.

I felt more than slighted soon afterwards. My office was on the way to the staff room, which was attended mostly by expat staff. Few Chinese took tea with the expats, although they were in the majority on staff, possibly because they weren't interested in the conversation, which was mostly about cricket and local, small 'p', politics.

Paul Morris used regularly to drop into my office on his way to the staffroom to tell me what I should be doing about this or about that. Paul was thin and wiry, with black hair and moustache, and a genial smile that could disappear in a nanosecond. At first I took his visits as being helpful, I felt very much the new chum in a strange system.

However, it began to dawn upon me that I was not being provided with helpful suggestions, but with orders.

‘Draw up an advert for a sociologist, I’ll help with the wording,’ Paul advised, smiling.

‘But I don’t think we need a sociologist. Our strength should be in educational psychology. We need someone in cognitive psychology, for balance.’

‘You’ve got enough psychologists.’ Paul snapped, not smiling.

‘But not in the needed areas. I think we should be building on expertise. I’m here to provide academic leadership and I intend to build a strong area in learning and motivation.’

Paul’s body language was loud and clear. *Empire building are we? We’ll soon see about that!*

The dean and the new department head were at loggerheads within weeks.

Like most education faculties, including that in Newcastle, there was in HKU that familiar and potentially disruptive split between ex-schoolies and academics. Brian Cooke, a bluff Yorkshire man, headed Curriculum Studies, a department of 34 staff many of which were the ex-schoolteachers, while my department of 16, contained most of those with an academic background. The departments had different priorities; bids for faculty resources were sorted out at faculty meetings where the voting pattern was depressingly the same: 35 for, 15 against. The cuckoo in our nest was Gerry M., a science curriculum guy – God knows what he was doing in Education – who always voted with Curriculum Studies. He was also a keen member of the University Cricket Club, as were other senior *gwailos* (Westerners) in Curriculum Studies.

Another problem I encountered was over promotion procedures. In Newcastle, lecturers were promoted if they met the criteria for senior lecturer. In Hong Kong, lecturers were promoted if the ratio of senior staff (senior lecturer and above) to lecturers in a department was less than 4:1, and if you were the best from your department. Senior lectureships were accordingly scarce, the competition deadly.

I was unaware of this when I advertised that first post – worded, after due and cautious thought, for either a psychologist or a sociologist. I told Paul I’d like to advertise at as high a level as possible.

‘You can advertise as Reader/SL. There’s an unfilled “floating” senior position,’ he advised.

‘Floating?’ Hong Kong staffing procedures moved in a mysterious way.

‘Yes, it’s not attached to a particular position, so you can attach that floating position to the SL vacancy and advertise for a Reader if you like.’

Sounded good to me, so I did.

And all hell broke loose. Unwittingly, I’d just blocked the promotion hopes of four members of my staff (all expats, for what that’s worth). To complicate matters, one contender, the only one without a PhD, informed me in no uncertain terms that Brimer had promised him the next SL post and that the promotion was his by right. I had no idea if Brimer had promised him the senior lectureship or not but he didn’t get it, not this time or the next. I was fast creating enemies within my own department.

To avert the mounting pressure on me – it didn’t – I set up an advisory committee in order to vet the applications for that new appointment in either psychology or sociology. They were unanimous that it had to be one person, David Watkins, who was a psychologist.

I already knew David. Unfortunately, he’d cited me as a referee: not unreasonably, as we had worked in the same field. But it fuelled the suspicion that I was indeed empire building. Although the committee did the short-listing and final selection, the rumour quickly sped around the faculty that I’d prevented the promotions of my own staff so I could appoint my own stooge.

I’d had no idea David would apply. If I had, I would have told him: ‘I’d welcome an application from you, but for Christ’s sake *don’t* use me as a referee!’

I was already depressed when I’d left Newcastle. Weeks of groping in the dark kept me that way. I discovered I was the non-cricket-playing new chum in a rock-hard system where the current powerbrokers happened to be members of the university cricket team, through which powerful alliances had been formed. In Newcastle, the dean was simply the chairman of the faculty board at which departments discussed and set their own agendas. Here, it was like playing a game in which the terms were familiar but the rules had been changed in ways my opponents knew and I didn’t, and where I couldn’t see their side of the board but they could see mine. By the end of October 1987, I was a regular at the

University Health Centre, where I was taken off the tricyclic doxepin and put onto the latest, a tetracyclic called tolvon, that didn't have the side effects of doxepin. So I was told.

One bright spot shining in the all-encompassing gloom was that in November 1987 I was to take up a three-week consultancy in at the University of Alberta with Bob Mulcahy, an ex-student of mine. Three weeks in Canada, with some recognition of one's expertise, seemed like bliss.

I gave a couple of seminars, which were warmly received Canadian style even if they really thought it a whole crock-load. It *felt* good, that was the main thing. I realized what I'd been missing in Hong Kong. When I gave seminars in Edmonton, people interacted with you, they asked questions and argued. Although things were going well during the day, tolvon wasn't getting me to sleep as doxepin used to. I had to go the U of A Health Service to get some sleeping pills. They gave me halcion. I then flew to Toronto, where John Kirby, my colleague from Newcastle days, met me and took me to Kingston for a mixed academic/personal visit. Mid-flight, I realised I'd lost my keys: I tore the seat apart trying to find them. Not there. A hostie appeared, no doubt more than a little alarmed at the sight of this guy attacking the seats in mid-flight. I explained breathlessly. All Canadian calm, she suggested I might have left them at security after walking through the metal-screening device on boarding. Ah, yes, silly of me.

Lying in bed at John's place, it hit me: *What if they aren't at security!* The horrendous possibilities that opened out prevented me from sleeping, the halcion no help. I flew back to Edmonton fermenting worst cases in my addled brain: *The plane's late! I'd forgotten the time change between Toronto and Edmonton and Lost Property will be closed! All the hotels will be booked out! I won't be able to get into my visitors' quarters! I'll spend the night pacing up and down in the snow!*

When I arrived in Edmonton Lost Property Office had just closed. However, an official recognized there'd probably be tragic consequences if this wild-eyed, gibbering Australian didn't get his precious bloody keys, so he opened the Lost Property especially for me – and there they were.

Halcion has been withdrawn in North America because of its side effects: loss of memory, mania and depression, symptoms that I'd been displaying in classic style.

And then it was back to that no-win game of blindfold chess.

When you're on the downward spiral, you tend to do things that keep you right on spiralling downwards. In my case, being badly stressed out and on antidepressants, I wasn't thinking clearly when clear thinking was the only thing that might have reversed the spiral. It was maybe a couple of years later that I finally said to my doctor: 'You know, I think tolvon is making me worse if anything.'

'Oh yes,' she replied, 'it sometimes does have that effect.' For which, thank you very much. I stopped taking it and immediately felt better.

But before this biochemically delayed state of calm, I had to deal with some stressful stuff. For example, I had been told that before my arrival, my predecessor had laid some time bombs. One by one they started to explode. Just before my arrival, a staff member had been appointed on a 24 month contract and promptly given 22 months' leave without pay, leaving the department under-staffed in the much needed area of statistics. I went cap in hand to the Vice-Chancellor, who agreed to increase our establishment to cover the post *pro tem*.

The International Association for the Assessment of Educational Achievement, which hyper-contracted to 'IEA', comprised member countries that did research comparing countries with each other on various aspects of educational achievement. Brimer had been head of the Hong Kong Centre for IEA, but prior to leaving, he had appointed his friend Albert Yee, from our rival Chinese University, as head.

My secretary, Y.K. Chan, was a mine of information because he had been secretary of the department since its inception in 1951. YK thought that the head of the IEA Centre belonged by statute to HKU so that it couldn't be transferred elsewhere. YK suggested that I ring the headquarters in Stockholm, who duly confirmed that the Hong Kong Centre for IEA was irrefutably in the Department of Education at HKU.

I had the ticklish task of convening a meeting of Hong Kong members of IEA, telling them and Albert Yee the glad news that Albert wasn't Head of the Hong Kong Centre after all: I was. And jolly glad of that too because in 1988 it took me to Frascati in Italy and to Beijing in 1990.

Two bombs defused, but more was to come.

The Faculty of Education had an award from Shell to finance a month's stay for a distinguished scholar to generate research amongst staff. In 1988, the nominee was a well-known US educator, but suddenly he withdrew. The dean called for fresh nominations from faculty members. He said he would make the choice in consultation with the department heads.

Excellent. I'd been pushing SOLO ever since I had arrived. I'd given an external course on SOLO that had been attended by the Chairman (*sic*) of the Hong Kong Examinations Authority (of which more later), the esteemed Kay Barker. I hoped she might see SOLO as an alternative to the mind-numbing rigidity of the HKEA's examining procedures. I'd also set up a SOLO working group from within Curriculum Studies with five methods lecturers. If my SOLO co-author Kevin Collis could come, he could take that over. I was finding it enough of a job trying to steer this department with square wheels without coordinating a research team. I sounded Kevin out; he would be happy to be nominated.

Frank Gillies, a lecturer in my department, nominated a philosopher from Australia, Kevin Harris. A week before the Faculty meeting that would ratify the decision, Gillies told me the Harris-type Kevin had already been approached.

I wrote to the dean, reiterating my case for the Collis-type Kevin, pointing out that his appointment would integrate the work of both our departments. I asked that the matter be placed at the meeting of the heads of department that was due before the faculty meeting. The heads of departments meeting was cancelled for 'lack of business', as a memo from the dean advised.

At the next meeting of Faculty Board, Paul Morris announced that the next Shell Fellow would be Kevin Harris. I objected in the strongest terms, not to the appointment of Kevin Harris, with whom I had got on well, but to the fact that his appointment had not been raised with the heads of the two departments. To the background of 'yes, it had been raised', 'no it hadn't', 'yes it had' I heard members of Faculty muttering angrily: not about what was angering me, but about this new chum, only months into his appointment, challenging his senior colleagues, even calling their credibility into question. I lost that one.

But in the event it didn't matter. The following year Kevin Collis spent a couple of months of sabbatical leave with us anyway, where he worked with colleagues in

curriculum studies as I'd originally proposed. This work was published in a book I edited (see footnote XX). So it all ended happily.

You just had to play the game on the existing rules. And there was also something to do with power-distance about it, which also seemed to have something to do with membership of the University's cricket team.

As had another such scene in Faculty Board about five years later. Curriculum Studies was hell bent on teaching a swathe of new BEds. They pleaded public interest, but I thought the real reason was to keep methods staff busy who otherwise had not only time on their hands but cricket bats as well. The new programmes had horrendous implications for my department because new B Ed degree meant we taught the 'core', taken by all students, whereas Curriculum Studies taught only the methods section, taken by only a few students. The proposals went through every time, in the usual voting pattern: Curriculum Studies – 34 (+1 cricket player from Education); Education - 15.

One of the new BEds was in Physical Education. Instead of staffing it from staff seconded to Curriculum Studies from the Sports Centre, a new two-and-one-half person Department of Physical Education and Sports Science was proposed. The proposed Head, Mike, was a pleasant man, another member was an excellent academic and a friend of mine – and both played in the University cricket team.

I wasn't opposed to the idea of playing cricket – as long as I was left out of it – or even of a new department, but there were all sorts of implications that we needed to discuss. For example: Aren't there more cost effective ways of utilising Mike and his merry one and a half persons than setting up a new department? Isn't a faculty made up of four departments comprising 34, 16, 8 and 2½ persons a trifle unbalanced? A forum was arranged one Saturday morning for such discussions. However, when I raised these questions they were ruled as not for the forum but for Faculty Board to discuss.

When it came to the meeting of the Faculty Board, I noted with some suspicion that the item of the new department was last on a long agenda. I raised the question of the wisdom of establishing a department of such a small size. I did not mention cricket teams.

'That was discussed at the forum. We can't waste time double-debating issues,' I was informed from the chair.

'But it specifically *wasn't* discussed at the forum,' I objected.

'Was.'

‘Wasn’t.’

‘Was so too.’

Staff were stirring angrily. Biggs was making trouble again. My colleague Sam Winter shouted abuse at the chair and walked out, and with that the certain seconder of a procedural motion I was framing of the what- in-fuck-is-going-on kind.

So I walked out too. No point in staying.

Back to power-distance. When Paul Morris took me to my first Senate meeting, he pointed out various members: ‘See that guy over there? That’s Professor V. Cultivate him, ask him to lunch. He sits on important committees and can make or break a proposal. On his right is Professor W. Don’t waste your time on him ...’ and so on through Professors X, Y and Z. Almost a repeat performance of JJ Auchmuty gossiping in the Montreal restaurant except that here I was being advised to adopt a *modus operandum* that was not really my style.

I also discovered that, like my first Advanced Studies Committee meeting, Senate had rather loose procedural rules. Senate was chaired by Vice-Chancellor Wang Gung Wu, who steered us through the agenda items. First to speak after the Vice-Chancellor as a matter of form was the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, followed by the all-powerful Dean of Medicine, and so on for the next few speakers in order of importance, after which we lesser members could make our trivial points. Frequently a vote was not taken. At some point in the discussion, during which the privileged alphas might have spoken several times, Gung Wu would say something like, ‘Well, as we seem to have reached agreement, I propose we adopt the motion.’

And that usually was that. If someone objected a hand count would be taken, but such objections were clearly seen as bad form.

I thought this not only repetitive, with the swans singing many times, but unfair. I had the feeling that the meeting was not always in agreement when the vote was not taken. I discussed this with several other professors. We drew up a memo, addressed to the Vice-Chancellor, suggesting basic meeting rules the Senate might usefully adopt, such as those I had been used to in Australia. Brian Cooke, looking at the other signatories, said: ‘These are all *gwailos*. I think we had better get some Chinese professors on board too.’ Dead right, I thought. But all the Chinese professors I approached saw our proposal as a kind of

lèse majesté against the Vice-Chancellor, a criticism of the way he ran things. No Chinese would sign the memo so we let the matter drop.

Also at my first senate meeting was a tricky matter of settling a dispute over the award of a PhD. The candidate was an Englishwoman who had since left Hong Kong and her supervisor was a fellow *gwailo*. The examiners internal and external were tied. The relevant faculty board reviewed the case and had recommended 'Fail'. It was now up to Senate to decide. The dean of the appropriate faculty, a Chinese, argued the case for 'Fail', the head of the department concerned, a *gwailo*, argued the case for 'Pass'. Then, without reading the thesis, our minds unclouded by mere knowledge, we members of Senate were to vote on whether the thesis should be passed or failed. The thesis was passed. Looking around as members voted, it seemed to me pretty clear that the vote had been along racial lines.

I must add that that was the first and only time I had seen that, so I'm content to believe that this particular correlation had been fortuitous.

All appointments at Hong Kong University were at that time probationary for one year. The head of department was the 'reporting officer' for substantiating academics, except for heads of departments whose reporting officer was their dean. If my performance had been deemed unsatisfactory by Paul Morris, I would not be substantiated: it would be bye-bye Biggs. A consummation devoutly to be wished by Paul, I would have thought.

I saw his report, as was my right. The crucial question, 'should the staff member be substantiated?' was answered affirmatively. However, I thought the tone was grudging and there were criticisms, in particular that I was neglecting the administration of the department in order to further my own research. Christ, if only! Trying to steer that cranky old bus had been an all-consuming task that had prevented me from getting on with what I thought I should be doing: research and teaching.

I sought an interview with the Vice-Chancellor to explain my side of things. A Singaporean, Gung Wu was a well-respected historian, who had spent twenty years at the Australian National University. I thought he would understand the differences between the ways Australian universities and HKU worked, and would therefore understand the sort of difficulties I had been experiencing, even how they might be rectified. I put it to him that there were serious structural flaws in the design of the Faculty of Education that pitted

department against department, and department head against dean. So while there was nothing *personal* between the dean and I, things inevitably became personal in a *sense*, but not personal, as *such*. As it were.

Gung Wu was unimpressed. ‘I think I know my deans, Professor Biggs.’

The interview was at an end.

New professors were required to give an inaugural lecture within a year of appointment. I saw mine as my big opportunity to rehabilitate myself. I chose the improvement of teaching as my theme. I drew on a principle that I’d already enunciated in *Process of Learning*: teachers need to minimise those things that encourage a surface approach in students, and maximise those things that encourage a deep approach. I illustrated as far as possible with the publications of my staff just to show what a productive and compatible bunch we all were. And I’d use brilliantly clear and inventive colour slides to illustrate my lecture, as technically perfect as possible.

Now, who could do the slides? I asked a senior colleague in the other department who advised me to use the University’s Centre for Media Resources. So I did, which mightily offended the technicians in my own department. It hadn’t occurred to me that preparing slides was their job. I was operating on tunnel vision, if others weren’t.

I was pleased with the lecture itself; I had received good feedback, if not from my technicians. I modified my lecture and submitted it for publication in the journal *Higher Education Research & Development*. The editor, Ingrid Moses, was so pleased she held up publication to include it in the current issue.⁶²

Another would-be contributor was not so pleased; his paper on a similar topic had been dropped for mine. I later learned he had accused me of plagiarizing his work. He had been visiting another institution in Hong Kong where he had said in a public seminar that to improve teaching you need to discourage a surface and encourage a deep approach; and here, he claimed, was this unprincipled Biggs fellow racing to print ahead of me with *my* message! I later confronted him with the time sequence: namely, that I had already made that same point in *Process of Learning* two years before his Hong Kong visit. Thus, if

⁶² ‘Approaches to the enhancement of tertiary teaching’. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 8, 7 – 26, 1989.

plagiarism had occurred I could not have been the offender. I suggested he'd better shut up, or he'd be hearing from my lawyers.

He wouldn't have been, but something drastic had to be said.

By 1990, things had started to look up enough for me to decide – given there were few other options – to stay until I turned sixty, the official retiring age. But definitely *not* as head of department. I went to see the Vice-Chancellor to offer my resignation as department head.

'I'm sorry, Professor Biggs, I won't accept that as a reason.'

'That' was my account of the unworkability of the headship, given the structural problems and the impasse that had emerged between me and the existing *dramatis personae*.

I was flabbergasted. I could resign as head. What could he do but accept it as I was already substantiated? Or I could use another ground, which was real enough and I'm sure the University Health Service would have corroborated me: my health was at risk. That's what I said.

'Ah,' he said. 'That's different. I'll accept that.'

Not only face had been saved but it was a breakthrough for the university. I was one of the first professors who was not automatically a head of department. Other departments welcomed the development. Non-professorial heads rapidly became as commonplace at HKU as they already were throughout the western world.

Chapter 12

Professor At Large: Community Service in Hong Kong

To an extent I hadn't dreamed of, a professor at HKU had obligations to serve the community. The universities were publicly funded and controlled by the University Grants Committee, and with the interest Hong Kong citizens took in education, the public felt an ownership over the universities that was not the case in Australia. While 'community service' was a desirable but low priority for Australian academics, it was virtually mandatory in Hong Kong and especially for an education professor. I was *ex officio* on several government committees, I was expected to make wise statements to the press when educational issues came up for public debate, to give out prizes on school speech days... it was never ending.

The Government Education Department (ED) was in charge of almost everything to do with schools except for examining, which was run by the Hong Kong Examinations Authority (HKEA). Brimer had been an expert in educational measurement. His expertise and his graduate students, many of whom were employed in the HKEA, helped produce possibly the most sophisticated testing and examining system in the world – and one that I saw as exerting a baneful influence on the quality of teaching and learning in Hong Kong's educational system. And here I was, an *ex officio* member of the HKEA Board that was enacting policies of which I totally disapproved. In a more drastic version of England's Eleven Plus (p. XXX), pupils were required to sit an examination at the end of Primary 6, the last year of primary school, the five preceding primary years being preparation for that dread event. On the basis of those results, children were allocated into 'bands' of scholastic ability. Then, like young birds of endangered species, the now-banded students were sent to different levels of secondary school, where irrespective of ability, all were taught the same curriculum and set the same external HKEA-run exams at Forms 5, 6 and 7, all of which (except Chinese-related studies) were set and had to be answered in English. This meant that in practice the HKEA, not the Education Department, controlled not only what was taught in all the schools but how it was taught, with lots of reworking old examination papers and memorising. The top Band 1 and 2

schools turned out excellent material for university, but Buddha help the lower band students whose English was poor to non-existent and who never had any intention of postsecondary study. Their secondary years were a painful and humiliating waste of time.⁶³

If the idea of schooling is to teach children what they need to learn to help them find their way around in the world, then such a system seems bizarre, not to say cruel. But that wasn't the idea. From early colonial times, all children were taught in English. The rationale was simple. If you want an obedient public service comprising bright English-speaking locals and you don't want to spend too much on educating them, teach everyone in English and then set stringent exams. Those who emerge as successful have to be: (a) bright, (b) English-speaking, and (c) amenable. The aim of the Hong Kong education system, until the last ten years or so, has been not to educate, but to select. I subsequently edited a book with that title.⁶⁴ This rigorous sorting exercise was carried out on the assumption that students were devious little shits who'd move heaven and earth to cheat. So students were allocated to an examining centre furthest from their own school as possible, just to make sure they wouldn't *chut mau* (which literally means 'out cat') or cheat. If they were late for the exam – which wasn't unlikely after negotiating three or four changes of bus to get to this deliberately inconvenient location – they would be admitted for the first time minus so-many marks. Late a second time was a near-death experience. All this made a mockery of a genuine assessment of what students were capable of achieving.

The most influential person on the HKEA was a New Zealander, the tautologously named and ever smiling Rex King. I was told that when he had heard of my arrival, he had said: 'Well, if he thinks he's going to introduce criterion-referenced assessment here, he's got another think coming.'

And yes, I did think that students should be assessed on how well they meet criteria or standards, not on how they compared to other students. And several years later, there was indeed a shift towards criterion-referenced assessment in the Education Commission reforms of 2000, and with that a change in the way students were taught.

⁶³ In 1999, over 16,000 lower band students sat for the Schools' Certificate examination and failed in *all* subjects. Not one pass in about 80,000 sittings!

⁶⁴ Biggs, J.B. (Ed.) (1996). *Testing: To educate or to select? Education in Hong Kong at the crossroads*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Educational Publishing Co.

This new system worked extremely well. The improvements made in reading, science and maths performance since 2000 to 2009 by Hong Kong primary and secondary students is one of the largest in the world. Australian students went backwards in that same period.⁶⁵

In January 1988, a few months after my arrival, one of my evening students asked me to give a speech and hand out the prizes on Speech Day at his school, which I shall call 'Lucky Fortune College'. Brimer and Cooke had done this sort of thing, so I thought it would be a breeze. I'd make a few notes and speak from those.

A week before Speech Day, the phone rang. 'Lucky Fortune College here. Where is the script?'

'What script?'

'For your talk. It has to be translated and handed out. We need it tomorrow. Can you send a messenger with it by lunchtime?'

Panic stricken, I scribbled a few pages of clichés: this fine school, with its old traditions, starting out on life, remember Frank Sinatra's song 'I did it my way', they'd know that. It turned out that Lucky Fortune was a bottom-of-the-barrel Band 5 school, ran by a strict Catholic order, who were unlikely to encourage kids from doing anything their way.

It was a disaster.

There were photos in the press of the new professor giving his speech, his message miraculously transformed into the headline: 'Instil team spirit, urges prof'⁶⁶. Not quite what I'd said, but rather better than what I did say. My son Stephen described me in the photo as looking like 'a puppet with its strings cut.' That was exactly how I felt.

I swore I'd never do another speech day again.

Another statutory appointment for the Professor of Education was to the Educational Research Establishment. The ERE was a body within the Government Education Department (ED) that did research on issues such as surveys of class size, pass rates, teaching methods and the effects of teaching in mother tongue as opposed to English.

⁶⁵ Jensen, B. *Catching Up: Learning from the best school systems in East Asia*. Melbourne: The Grattan Institute, February 2012.

⁶⁶ *South China Morning Post*, *Young Post*, January 26, 1988.

The papers for my first meeting were delivered to my office the day before the meeting: two enormous folders, describing in detail about forty projects the ERE was carrying out. As I was up to my eyebrows in busywork already, I flipped through to get a general idea of what they were about. I jotted a few notes on the projects that interested me and decided to comment on them from my notes. No need to take those great big folders to the meeting.

At the meeting, I quickly found out that it was not only assumed I had read the lot, but that I would have stayed up all night, if needs be, to compile a dossier of critical comments and analyses for all forty projects, with suggestions about what still remained to be done, project by project. And of course I was expected to have the folders with me.

My counterpart at the Chinese University was also at the meeting. He twigged my predicament in a flash. Given the state of rivalry between CUHK and HKU, he saw game, set and match.

‘And what does my colleague think of the sampling design for Project 34?’ he asked, turning to me with a kind smile, carefully not mentioning the title of Project 34. I had publicly to confess I’d left the documents at home; I asked to share his folder. With an even kinder smile, he shared his documents with me.

I read the material after that. And I lugged those great big folders to following meetings.

The Educational Research Association of Hong Kong was run out of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. They held a large Annual Conference, attended not only by academics but also by teachers, politicians and journalists. In 1990, they decided to offer a prize for the best educational researcher in Hong Kong. They awarded the prize to a professor who had recently been appointed the School of Education at CUHK.

The organisers approached Gung Wu, our Vice-Chancellor, to ask if they could hold the ceremony in Loke Yew Hall, HKU’s old and splendid auditorium, for this very important ceremony of awarding the educational research prize. They were letting him know there was nobody at HKU who could match the quality of the educational research being done at CUHK.

Gung Wu was evidently aware of these tricks. He refused – and my guess is that he saw that the story reached us in his own education faculty to let us know that he hadn't been fooled.

Incidents like this fanned the flames of competition into a raging wildfire. Whenever the ED called for tenders for a research job, which was often, Paul Morris urged faculty members to put in for it: 'Otherwise Chinese U will get it!'

Let Chinese U get it. Let them spend their time on local, game-playing busywork. You don't make academic reputations doing that sort of thing. Anyway, the ED had its own ERE to do its research, hadn't it? Curriculum Studies didn't see it my way, of course, and so they did a lot more of that stuff than we did in Education, but we did some, for goodwill. It kept us busy, which in Hong Kong was the main thing.

I kept meeting the headmistress of one of the most prestigious girls' schools in Hong Kong, on committee after committee, meeting after meeting. Isobel, as I shall call her, was friendly and seemed relaxed but all this busywork must be driving her crazy, I thought. How could this sweet mannered and feminine person do it all? I mentioned my problem: 'I don't have time to do everything I should be doing with all these committees and outside commitments. How do you manage?'

'Not a problem,' she replied with a gentle smile, 'I think it is wonderful.'

Spoken like a true Hong Konger.

Chapter 13

Chinese Students: The Paradox of the Chinese Learner

My first tutorial class at HKU was with students who were about to undergo their first round of practice teaching. They were nervous. So instead of moving straight into the deadly boring tutorial questions that they, along with all other tutorial groups, were supposed to have prepared in response to an equally deadly reading for the week, I decided we'd have a little discussion first. Help get to know them, type of thing.

‘What do you think about going on practice teaching?’

Silence.

Alright, I've phrased it badly, too open. ‘What in *particular* worries you about your forthcoming practice teaching?’

More silence. Some structuring was needed. ‘Okay, then, let's go round the class. Let's start with you,’ I smiled encouragingly, ‘yes, you at the end...’

‘You’ was a boy. His round face shone with deep embarrassment. Finally he muttered, ‘The childrens are naughty.’

We weren't getting very far. Back to those dreary tutorial questions they had prepared.

In the evening, I taught part-timers who had been teaching in school all day. The silence as I entered the room was unnerving, as they waited for me to start talking. I didn't want to lecture to a class of twenty or so but I was forced to. I wanted them to chip in, ask questions, disagree, comment, do *something* than just sit there, listening and taking notes or, as did not a few, go to sleep. But every pause, every provocative statement, where I would expect Australian or Canadian students to leap in with a comment, met with – nothing. I had to plough on, and if, as was likely, I ran out of prepared material, I had to ad lib until the scheduled end of the lecture. Spinning stuff out wasn't my idea of teaching so I decided to get them to be more active by giving them an individual project to do. I outlined the requirements.

‘Any questions?’

Silence.

‘Good, you all know what to do then. See you next week.’

No sooner had I stepped outside the classroom, twenty people jumped on me, each one clamouring to find out individually what they were supposed to be doing for the project. Shite, I thought, had Paul been *right* in saying these people wouldn’t leave you alone? I’d never had these problems before in my teaching. Reluctantly, I had to conclude that all those western stereotypes were right after all: these students were passive, too shy to speak in class, browbeaten, assessment-driven, perhaps even more than a little obtuse.

I was teaching them but they wouldn’t learn. It was their fault, not mine, that they weren’t learning as well as they should.

One project with the Educational Research Establishment in which I became involved was into the language medium of instruction. It was massive, involving testing in hundreds of schools. The question: Was the quality of the students’ learning better if taught in mother-tongue Cantonese instead of in English? Well, I thought quickly, they’d be more likely to use a surface approach if taught in English: they need my Learning Process Questionnaire here. I told the committee I’d be very happy to offer my LPQ to the ED but I would like the data for standardisation purposes, just like I had done with the Australian Council for Educational Research a few years previously. With large samples like these I would be able to compare the Hong Kong data directly with my Australian data.

‘Can’t be done.’

‘Why can’t it be done?’

‘Crown Copyright.’

‘Pardon me?’

‘It is because this is a Government project. The Government holds the copyright on all data associated with it. Therefore you can’t publish anything arising out of it.’

And they expected us academics to work our arses off for them for nothing, not even for the right to publish! Publication was our currency, our validation as academics. My face reflected these ungracious thoughts.

‘But if you allow us to use the LPQ, we’ll get you another, independent sample. Crown copyright doesn’t then apply.’

Thank you, ERE. When I administered the LPQ and SPQ to large samples of school and university students I fully expected, given the conditions in schools

particularly, that Hong Kong students would be much higher on surface and achieving approaches and lower on deep, compared to Australian students. This, I then thought, would be an excellent validation of my questionnaires.

The Hong Kong students were higher than Australians on the achieving approach, as expected, but they were *lower*, not higher, on surface approach and *higher*, not lower, on deep approach. But before concluding that my questionnaires were not valid, at least on the deep and surface scales, I replicated these findings and so did others. The results were consistent: From primary through secondary to tertiary education, Chinese students tend to be deeper learners than Western students. The only exception I found was in medical faculties: Australian students were higher on deep approach than HKU students taught traditionally. The Australians had been taught by problem-based learning, the Hong Kong students taught very traditionally.⁶⁷ So it has to do with method of teaching, which is understandable, but the teaching methods at school level in Hong Kong seemed far worse in Western eyes to that in Australia, and still the Hong Kong students learned at a deeper level than Australians..

An interesting complement to these findings is that the IEA studies in maths and science (see p. XXX) showed that students from Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea and Japan – the Confucian heritage countries – did consistently better than most other students from Europe, Australia and the Americas. How is that possible if they come from these overcrowded, fierce and over-tested classrooms in which rote learning is the main survival strategy? And how come Chinese students continually clean up the First-class Honours and Gold Medals in our own universities – and still be stereotyped as passive rote learners? It doesn't say much for our examining if rote learners obtain top grades.

Enter 'The Paradox of the Chinese Learner'.⁶⁸ How is that Chinese students outperform Western students when the former are taught in what educational wisdom says are poor learning environments and the latter in effective environments? Are Western educators simply wrong about what constitutes good teaching?

⁶⁷ Biggs J.B. (1996). Western misperceptions of the Confucian-heritage learning culture. In D. Watkins and J. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological, and Contextual Influences*. (pp.45-68). Hong Kong: Centre for Comparative Research in Education/Camberwell, Vic: Australian Council for Educational Research.

⁶⁸ 'Approaches to learning of Asian students: A multiple paradox', Fourth Asian Regional Congress of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Kathmandu, Nepal, January 1992.

Some say that the explanation of the paradox is genetic: Chinese and Japanese are simply brighter in the appropriate ways. I prefer another explanation, or set of explanations, based on culture and schooling – yes, despite those ghastly exams. When Chinese appear to be rote memorizing, they are not. Rote memorizing means memorizing without understanding. The Chinese memorize *in order to help* understanding, just as classical musicians do, just as Westerners learning to understand anything complex do. A good novel, complex music, or any complex task, requires several passes if it is to be fully understood, with signposts memorised along the way. Progressive education is wrong to downplay the role of intelligent memorizing.

Another factor is that Chinese culture accords education high value. In the words of a Chinese proverb: In books, there are golden houses and beautiful girls. Study hard and you'll get your reward. That saying impressed me so much it became the theme of my first published novel.⁶⁹

1992 kicked off with a conference in Kathmandu, where I first aired the paradox of the Chinese learner. Ference Marton, whom I'd first met at Gothenburg, saw the paradox in terms of Chinese ways of memorising⁷⁰, with which I agree, but I also think it raises interesting questions about the context of schooling and assessing that fly in the face of Western received wisdom about the nature of good teaching.

I'll come back to that question of what is good teaching but let me now continue with my own experiences with Chinese students. As noted, my first experiences were discouraging. Then in 1989, in the tutorial class corresponding to my first poor start in 1987, the students were lively, critical, *funny*. Perhaps in those two years I was more used to local conditions and had learned to relax, allowing them to relax in turn. At any rate, these students reminded me of my best Dip Ed group in Newcastle, when every tutorial was a screech. The main difference was that Australians called me 'John', which Chinese students never did.

Maria Chong submitted an essay 'Who am I in the lives of our students?' in which she contrasted the two sides of Chinese teachers. Some call their students 'rubbish,' 'beast' and 'idiot', she wrote, while some support them 'to give out their fullness (with)

⁶⁹ *The Girl in the Golden House* (Pandanus Press, 2003)

⁷⁰ With Gloria Dall'Alba and Tse Lai Kun in Chapter 4, Watkins, D., & Biggs, J. (Eds.) op. cit.

LOVE'. Some teachers combine both aspects, the harsh name-calling springing from a traditional belief that praise enervates character, the supportiveness involving what might well be called love. Chinese teachers believe that they have a moral as well as an academic role, whereas most Australian teachers believe they only have an academic role.⁷¹ Teachers in Chinese culture tend to be stricter than Western teachers yet the bond between teacher and student is more personal, more pastoral, than in the West.

For example, David Watkins and I took a coursework Masters of Education programme that ran for the years 1989-91. Thirteen students, full time teachers or administrators, took the course. We grew quite close and after they'd graduated, we usually had dinner whenever I was in Hong Kong, the last time being in 2010, nearly twenty years later. This sort of thing never happened with Australian students; with all good feeling, we simply went our different ways. Not so with Hong Kong students.

So within two to three years, the climate of my classrooms had done an about-turn. At first, I in effect had been calling my students 'beast', blaming them for not being what I wanted them to be. Then I realized the obvious. It was up to me as their teacher to actively involve them in ways in which they felt comfortable. Blaming the students for being what they are is an abdication of a teacher's responsibility. As one expat lecturer at another Hong Kong university said about a proposal to introduce problem-based learning:

Students in Hong Kong ... expect lecturers to teach them everything they are expected to know. They have little desire to discover for themselves... They wish to be spoon fed and in turn they are spoon fed...⁷²

That lecturer was completely wrong. The problem-based learning programme was introduced and the students liked it and they performed very well.

Getting students actively involved is an old idea, with many variations: 'problem-based learning', 'active learning', 'project methods', 'discovery learning' and so on. The notion that activity is crucial to sound learning is universal. But what activities? They had

⁷¹ Ho, I. 'Are Chinese teachers authoritarian?' In Watkins, D., & Biggs, J. (Eds.) *Teaching the Chinese Learner*. Hong Kong: Centre for Comparative Research in Education/Camberwell, Vic: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2001.

⁷² Quoted in McKay, J., & Kember, D. (1997). Spoon feeding leads to regurgitation: a better diet can result in more digestible learning outcomes. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 16, 55-68.

to be personally and culturally agreeable. Calling on Chinese students – or any students – to answer open-end questions in a foreign language in public is likely to be neither.

The key to the problem of engaging students in appropriate activities is assessment. Students everywhere, but especially in Hong Kong, will learn whatever they think will maximize their grades. Give them assessment tasks that require memorization, they will memorize. They'd be mad if they didn't. So the answer is to give them assessment tasks that require them to do what they're supposed to learn – and then they'll learn what they're supposed to learn.

It sounds so obvious. One thing that makes it difficult in practice is bureaucracy.

In the Faculty of Education, the rules and regulations governing assessment were crippling. Over the years I tried to implement various forms of assessment. Most were rejected by the Faculty Board of Examiners: 'Can't be done.'

What can't be done? This sort of thing:

- Negotiating the terms of assessment with a class during the semester. *You had to tell them at the beginning of the semester, as approved by the Board of Examiners.* That ruled out contract learning, in which teacher and students negotiate a 'learning contract' at the beginning of the semester: a technique I had successfully used in Newcastle.
- Fine-tuning assessment from one semester to the next, on the basis of how well it is working or not working. *It couldn't be approved in time by the Board of Examiners.* That ruled out action learning, which is an important method for improving teaching through reflective practice, which later became an important project in Hong Kong universities (p. zzzz).
- Having students hand in their assignments directly to me. *Assignments had to be handed in at the General Office. We then have invincible proof that an assignment has been handed in on time. Any assignments submitted after that deadline have marks automatically deducted.* The teacher should be the one to wield any discretion over late submissions.

I aired such concerns in a memo, 'Reflections on assessment', which I circulated throughout the faculty. Many colleagues were outraged, but I believe I had gained more than I had lost in the eyes of those whose opinions I did value.⁷³

In 1994 I spent some study leave in Canada. I returned very impressed with the use of 'authentic assessment' and assessment portfolios in Canadian elementary schools. Authentic assessment means that students are assessed on tasks that mimic real life. They put their best work in portfolios for assessment, just like artists or photographers put their best work in a portfolio.

The next year was my last before retiring. I decided to side-step the Board of Examiners, and just go ahead and use portfolio assessment in a BEd course about my old hobbyhorse: how knowledge of psychology could improve students' teaching. Previously I had been teaching the course as most educational psychology courses for teachers had been taught: the students are taught psychology then they retell in exams and/or assignments what psychology they had learned with some discussion of how they thought it might affect their teaching. It was up to them to put that into practice after they had graduated. However, these part-time students in my last year were already teachers. They should be telling me how psychology helped them make better teaching decisions, not for me to tell them how it should be helping them and then assessing them on how well they'd remembered what I'd told them. Accordingly, I told them to put examples of how psychology had informed their teaching decisions in a portfolio. The students were at first deeply threatened, never having done anything like this before. I suggested they keep a reflective diary, writing in it anything that might indicate how their teaching had been improved, such as samples of conversations with their own students, lesson plans, samples of student work, and they form groups and partnerships with other teachers in the class and compare notes.

⁷³ The Faculty of Education was very much a curate's egg. Most staff were busy and dedicated – the publication rate was far higher than that at Newcastle had been – but there was a culture of conformity, which at its worst led to closing ranks against criticism. One ex-member of staff, Hugh Tyrwhitt-Drake, who was appointed after I had left, wrote a book about the Faculty called *Web of Deceit: Moral Bankruptcy at the University of Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Piecemeal Press, 2002, which made a similar point about conformity – rather less delicately than I have – plus he had a lot of other points of his own to make.

Their portfolios were rich and exciting, the results, in terms of As and Bs awarded, much better than I'd previously obtained. The feedback was the best I'd received from a class.

A student teacher in another course had given me a splendid metaphor for assessment by portfolio:

When I stand in front of a class, I don't see stupid or unteachable learners, but boxes of treasures waiting for us to open!⁷⁴

This prompted me to envisage the following exchange:

Teacher: How many diamonds have you got?

Student: I don't have any diamonds.

Teacher: Then you fail!

Student: But you didn't ask me about my pearls, my jade, and my amethysts!

That's what traditional assessment does by asking pre-set questions with pre-determined answers. Traditional exam questions are about the only form of communication in which we ask questions to which we already know the answers and where the respondents already know that we know. Not much communication there, not to mention that it is extremely boring for all parties. If we want to know all the treasures the students had really acquired, not just those diamonds we'd happened to think of, we should ask them to show us all their treasures. Then we can assess their value.

This experiment with portfolios gave me an idea that was so obvious it was amazing it had never been used before. Well it had, I later discovered, by Ralph Tyler in 1949.⁷⁵ Tyler's book was used in most if not all teacher education courses in the USA for years but with zero effect. Driving instruction is a good example of what I (and Tyler) mean. The intended learning outcome of driving instruction is that the student learns how to drive a car satisfactorily, the teaching method is driving a car, and the assessment is whether or not the car is driven to the desired standard. A driving instructor would be seriously derelict if she or he only lectured on driving, and then issued a licence on the basis of a multiple-choice test. Yet that's what many teachers in many universities are

⁷⁴ From Cheung Chi Ming, a PCEd. student.

⁷⁵ *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949.

doing most of the time. The teaching methods, and the final assessment, are not aligned to what we want the students to learn. Likewise, the intended outcome of my BEd course was that students would improve their teaching by applying their knowledge of psychology, the teaching method was getting them to apply psychology in their teaching, and the assessment was how well they had applied it.

I expanded this idea as *constructive alignment*⁷⁶, a form of outcomes-based teaching that aligns our teaching and our assessment to the learning outcomes we intend the students to achieve. The key is to define the intended outcomes first, in terms of a verb and topic content, such as ‘*apply* expectancy-value theory to solve a discipline problem’, ‘*explain* how increases in atmospheric carbon dioxide may cause global warming’, ‘*generate* a hypothesis to account for a particular observation’. That verb then needs to be activated in teaching, because that verb defines the activity the students are supposed to be able to carry out. Assessment then is a matter of setting a task – often the teaching/learning activity itself – so that the teacher can judge how well the outcomes have been achieved. Traditionally, teaching often does not directly address the verb, the target learning activity, it only addresses the topic. In that last case, then, the questions for the teacher then are: (a) ‘what topics do I need to cover?’ and (b) ‘how do I cover them?’ The answer to the last is all too often: ‘I’ll talk about them.’

My teaching experience at Hong Kong, which seemed to start off so badly, thus ended up with the best teaching I’d ever done. Hong Kong students, demonised as so assessment driven and passive, gave me work of consistently higher quality than I’d received from Australian and Canadian students. Yes, Hong Kong students *are* assessment driven – that’s the point.

Make the assessment task equivalent to what you want them to learn and they’ll go at it like tigers.

So how can I reconcile my quite contradictory experiences with Hong Kong students? I see three levels of teaching that are particularly relevant to the problems of teaching across cultures:

⁷⁶ Biggs, J. *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, Buckingham: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill, 1999. The fourth edition, with Catherine Tang as co-author, incorporating years of consulting, appeared in 2011.

1. *Teaching focuses on student differences.* The task for teachers is to know their content well and expound it clearly. With teaching held constant, variability of learning then depends on individual differences between students: some are intelligent and keen, others are poor students. This is a blame-the-student model of teaching, which is exactly what I had been doing on first arriving in Hong Kong. I had held Western expectations as to how students should behave and if they didn't live up to my expectations, I saw it as their fault.
2. *Teaching involves a range of teaching skills or competencies.* Teacher should acquire many different teaching skills and competencies, and if students don't learn it then becomes the teacher's fault. The focus of success or failure being on the teacher, this is a blame-the-teacher model. In cross-cultural teaching, teachers at this level might learn to teach with the skills culturally appropriate to the taught. This is important but the focus here is on what the teacher does, not what the student is doing. When teaching international students, with many different ethnicities in the one classroom, adapting to all those ethnicities is impossible.
3. *Teaching focuses not on what the teacher does but on what and how the students are to learn.* The focus here on what the student does. No longer is it possible to say: 'I taught them, but they didn't learn.' Expert teaching certainly includes mastery of a variety of teaching techniques, but those techniques need to be geared to the learning activities needed for learning a particular task. Teaching techniques aren't much use if learning doesn't take place. The key is to define what it is you want students to learn, then teach in a way that helps them achieve that.

In the third level, the focus is on the outcomes the students are supposed to learn, how best to help them, given their cultural context, and how to ascertain how well they have learned those outcomes. Constructive alignment is an example of this third approach to teaching.

I have two sets of memories of Hong Kong: mostly unpleasant, as at first was the case; and mostly pleasant, sometimes extremely so, later on. One important turning point was my giving up the headship of the department. I was warned not to do so by friends, on the grounds that at least I was in charge and if somebody else came in as head, it could be

much worse for me. That was not so. It was pretty clear that I was not born to be an administrator: as an academic, my life was in teaching and research – particularly research into teaching. Administration was simply a chore that had to be done, that I didn't like, and that prevented me from doing what I did like to do and that I was good enough at doing for me to have been appointed – as an administrator! A classic case of nonalignment in the workplace.

The second turning point was quite personal. My marriage hadn't been working too well since the problems at Newcastle while those in Hong Kong only made matters worse. A depressed misery-guts must have been an unlovely person to live with. And as I spent virtually the whole year in Hong Kong, while Margaret spent more and more time in Newcastle, what happened was inevitable, if culpable on my part. I fell in love – which turned out to be a wonderful cure for depression. Catherine Tang was a senior lecturer at the HK Polytechnic University, originally in physiotherapy, but she became more interested in the teaching and assessing of physio than in physio itself. She did a PhD in education at HKU, with me as principal supervisor. Ah, a repeat of the Orr Case then! No, for two major reasons. Catherine was a senior academic in another institution, not an easily influenced teenager straight from school; and although I was on Catherine's assessment committee, my role as supervisor was to introduce her and then shut up while the others, and especially the all-important external examiner, questioned and probed her. If they wanted her to rewrite sections, or to fail her, it was out of my hands. Academic justice would be done. As indeed it was: she moved into staff development, heading up two staff development centres in two different institutions, with a special interest in improving teacher and assessment, using constructive alignment as a framework. She is now my wife and we work jointly on writing and consulting on teaching and learning in higher education.

Catherine was the major reason why life in Hong Kong became so rewarding. Apart from the coincidence of our professional interests, together we enjoyed that other side of Hong Kong, the Good Life: the hiking, the socialising, the eating, and cultural life generally.

Hong Kong had a retiring age of 60, a relic from colonial days in which it was believed that, in the hot and humid climate of Hong Kong, effete Anglo-Saxons would be clapped

out by that age. I was offered an extra year in the department, but I refused. I outlined my reasoning in a letter to *The South China Morning Post* (17/11/95):

One of the symptoms of old age is an increasing belief in one's indispensability. The upshot is that several (Australian) universities are retaining increasing numbers of individuals whose determination to cling on increases with their failing judgment. They are not only blocking the career paths of younger and frequently better qualified people, but in the nature of the case usually do a worse job, and on much higher salaries. . . . Hong Kong's compulsory retiring age is a blessing for all... Those who have already lived the best part of their lives may or may not have realized their dreams or their potentials: that is up to them. But however that may be, they have no right to stand in the way of younger people, thereby disallowing them the chance of ever realizing theirs.

Leave on a high note, in other words. My high note, and the academic year in which I turned 60, was 1994-5, that year with the BEd class when constructive alignment was conceived if not yet quite born.

I had written near to final drafts of two novels before coming to Hong Kong but the punishing pace in Hong Kong ensured I never found time to get them into publishable shape. I wanted to try to do that – and I felt there were more novels to come. And here was the chance, still reasonably fit and young enough, I thought, to take a second bite at life's cherry. I had already bought a townhouse on the beautiful central Coast of New South Wales with that in mind.

But now I had other unfinished business. The more I thought about it, the more I saw that the idea of constructive alignment needed developing and generalising: I felt another book coming on, but it wouldn't be fiction, not yet. I decided to do consulting work on university teaching to keep my feet on the ground and my hands dirty, necessary to the credibility of my book. And since Catherine had been promoted to head the Educational Development Centre at the HK Polytechnic University and was prime carer for her parents, I'd do as much consultancy work in Hong Kong as I could wangle.

Chapter 14

Disjoint Ventures: Some Chinese Universities

Vice-Chancellor Gung Wu encouraged academic exchanges with universities in the Peoples' Republic of China. If an academic wanted to go to China to carry out research, or to bring a Mainland scholar to Hong Kong, you only had to ask. He had a fund that would cover costs, except for the obligatory gifts. When Mainlanders visited us, they would bring the Chinese equivalent of beads and mirrors for us barbarians – small Chinese wall hangings (some were very nice), vases (even nicer), paperweights, things with Chinese characters on them. In turn, we were expected to bear gifts when we visited them, only our beads and mirrors were expected to be on a more lavish and more useful scale. I had found a street stall in Kowloon that sold rulers with electronic calendar and calculator for \$HK10 (about \$2). These were ideal: they looked impressive and they actually worked.

In February, 1988, the Guangdong College of Education invited me to give seminars on SOLO. My wife Margaret came on this trip, with Clarence Pong, from Curriculum Studies, the interpreter for my talk. We were met at the Jetfoil terminus by the College Liaison Officer, Mr. Chan, a couple of teachers, and the College bus. We were taken straight to lunch in a worker's restaurant. Margaret surprised me by asking for a knife and fork, pretending she couldn't use chopsticks. Later she explained. As we came in, she saw the staff rinsing chopsticks in a bucket of cold water by the gutter. When we were sat at our table, she had noted that the wooden chopsticks laid out in our seating places were cracked and given what she'd seen, she'd decided they were not very hygienic.

Mr. Chan, a trim little man looking proudly uncomfortable in a new ill-fitting suit – you could tell it was new because it still had the label on it – over-ordered by a factor of *N*. I later found out why. The bus driver, representing The People amidst all these highly suss intellectuals, joined in the meals for visitors and it was his privilege to take possession of the doggy bag. Bus drivers wielded extraordinary influence in Chinese

universities. They, with janitors and gardeners, sat on the university council; they were to be kept sweet. Mr. Chan had been doing just that. But evidently not sweet enough.

It had been raining heavily and the roads were covered in clinging mud. The entrance to the College was blocked, which meant our bus had to cross the median strip. Halfway across, the wheels span and we were stuck in the mud. All passengers had to get out to push. Dapper little Mr. Chan in his new suit eagerly pushed behind a rear wheel. The driver floored it, the wheels spun, and a mortified Mr. Chan and his lovely new suit disappeared under rapidly accumulating layers of mud. I happened to see the driver's face in the side mirror. He was chortling with glee.

On arrival at the College, the mud-encased Mr. Chan, jabbering apologies through a hole in the mud where his face used to be, fled while we proceeded to the Principal's office. There we met Mr. Lee, a large, smiling man of genial presence, but his body language, and his traditional black flowing cloak and round black cap, spoke: Power. Guangdong College provided in-service courses to school principals; they studied for two years fulltime in residence, on full pay, which gave them a master's degree. I thought this very generous – until I learned that full pay meant 120 yuan a month, which at that time was about \$25. The students' quarters were long narrow rooms, the two long walls having two tiers of bunks, six each side, a bare light bulb in the ceiling. At meal times, the students – these were school principals – would bring their own plastic dish, some using ice-cream containers, and a pair of chop sticks, and queue up for a dollop of rice and a dollop of what was going: meat, fish and/or stir-fried vegetables. No tables, sit where you can, wash up under a cold tap, then *chop chop*, back to work.

A young psychologist, who had an American PhD, was delegated to look after me, and while we talked man-talk, his wife was delegated to take Margaret downtown to show her the sights of Guangzhou. They didn't see much: the lady had wanted to sit and drink real coffee. That was luxury, she explained. She too had studied in the US and had got to like little luxuries, like drinking coffee and living with her husband. Here, her husband lived in male quarters in the College, she with the girls in female quarters. I guess it made the One Child Policy that much easier.

The seminar went off well. I spoke a few sentences, Clarence translated, I gave them my next few sentences, and so on. Clarence had already written Chinese characters on my overheads so they should have understood okay, and judging from the nods and

smiles and questions, they did understand. I asked them to write down on a scrap of paper what they thought 'learning' was. They wrote sophisticated replies, like 'learning is a way of understanding the world'. They were intelligent, warm and enthusiastic.

We had dinner that night in a revolving restaurant on top of the Guangzhou Park Hotel, overlooking the worksite for the forthcoming Guangdong Exhibition. As we ate, we looked out the window to see below us a continuous chain of workers, stripped to the waist, carrying a yoke on their shoulders, a large bucket filled with earth suspended from each end. They trudged in a chain down the gaping hole where the foundations would soon be poured, dumped their loads of earth, then walked back up to ground level where they filled their buckets again, then back down to the gaping hole, and so on. It was probably little different from the way the pyramids had been built but it was cheaper than bulldozers.

The final day, Mr Lee insisted on a 7 am breakfast. Dim sums, with garlic tripe dominating: I remember that very well, because the tripe gave me a gall bladder attack on the way back in the train. Immediately after breakfast came the sting. This was my first lesson in learning that there always was a sting when visiting China on business: always. The purpose of my visit hadn't been to enlighten Mr Lee's students and staff about SOLO after all. He wanted several of his staff to be trained in the Education Faculty at HKU, and could I please see about getting scholarships to allow this? I didn't say what I thought: that I couldn't see a hope in hell of anything of the kind. But you never know. So that is what I said.

'I'll put to them at HKU. It may be difficult, but you never know. There may well be funds for this sort of thing.' But most probably not.

As indeed there wasn't. But give them their due: it was a good try.

Our final outing, on the way to the train station, was to the White Swan, a luxury hotel on the Pearl River. We admired the huge multi-level foyer, with a waterfall at the far end, coffee shops, bars, tourist shops off the mezzanine and ground floor areas. It could have been anywhere in the corporate world, but at that time after our experiences it was a surprise to find something like this in communist Guangzhou. After consulting with Clarence, I offered to shout them all to lunch, including the ubiquitous bus driver. Clarence thought it would be a culturally acceptable gesture, even though he thought they

probably would claim it on expenses whoever paid. I thought they would too. But never mind, this was my call but I ordered carefully.

The bus driver could get stuffed, but not at my expense.

Next time, Mainland academics came to me. Sylvia Opper, a highly respected psychologist in my department, ran the Hong Kong IEA Early Childhood study. She had previously run programmes for six Mainland Chinese centres for training in statistical analysis, which had been Brimer's specialty. Now retired, Brimer wrote telling me he would be unable to return for the 1988 programme because the funding body would only fund an institution, such as HKU, not an individual. We found a replacement in Meng Hong Wei from Beijing, then a graduate student with us, now a well-known statistician.

In June 1988, seventeen members of the Early Childhood team from China arrived. Their funding was through our Finance Office. They were to receive *per diems* to cover out-of-pocket expenses and their accommodation at the University's Robert Black College. Instead, they booked in at a cheap hostel in the rather sleazy suburb of Wanchai and pocketed the change. On their arrival, as department head I hosted the inevitable reception with the usual mutually congratulatory speeches, after which the two leaders came to my office. They wanted two cheques drawn against the expenses and given to them. I said I'd look into it, as a not inconsiderable amount of money was involved.

I found out that last time they were in Hong Kong, the team members complained they didn't get their *per diems*, while the two leaders took back a couple of refrigerators, television sets, hi fi equipment and other appliances that were difficult to obtain in China. I consulted with the Finance Office, who agreed it would be better to go through the tiresome business of issuing 17 individual cheques rather than two large ones. So that is what the Finance Office did, to the ill-concealed fury of the two leaders.

The Chinese team had brought their data with them but they didn't want to be trained to analyse it themselves, they wanted Sylvia's team to analyse it for them. That was not what their funding was for or what we were expecting. I agreed with Sylvia that we should continue with the original proposal that we train them to do their own data analysis, not to provide them with a data analysis service.

I minded my own business for the next two weeks as I had plenty of other things on my plate. I hosted the closing reception with the usual congratulatory speeches and gave them each an electronic ruler.

The two leaders returned to Beijing in high dudgeon. They wrote a long letter to Brimer in England, complaining that that awful Professor Biggs had ignored them, that the training programme did not do what they needed, so please come back to Beijing to do the next one, 'without any relations with the University of Hong Kong.' Brimer sent a copy of that letter to Wang Gung Wu, the Vice-Chancellor, with a covering letter to Gung Wu.

'Would I care to comment?' Gung Wu not unreasonably asked.

Yes, I would care to comment and did, providing copies of correspondence including the letter to me in which Brimer had withdrawn from the programme. I heard nothing more.

On reflection, however, I wondered if there were one or two cultural issues I wasn't sensitive to at the time. One was about the role of head of department. In a Chinese university that role was pastoral. Then, if not now, department heads did little teaching and little research, but they did ensure that staff and especially visitors were well looked after: suffocatingly well, as I was later to find out. Accordingly, I would have been expected to attend all their workshop sessions, to have looked wise and to have said wise things, even though I knew bugger all about what was going on. I would also have been expected to invite them to my home, to have taken them out to dinner, possibly several times over the two weeks, and to have hugely over-ordered each time, so the two leaders would return to the hostel weighed down with delicious doggy bags.

All that simply hadn't occurred to me. And even if it had, I would have decided that I'd already exceeded the call of duty. I was going through a difficult time and had plenty of other things to worry about.

I'm not sure if the other issue was 'cultural' or not. Possibly the two leaders expected to receive all the *per diems*, not in order to grab the lot for themselves – perish the thought – but so they could deal them out to their flock as they saw fit, not as I saw fit.

Here is that problematic cultural divide in a nutshell: I saw their way as corrupt, they saw mine as causing them to lose face. Not to mention a bunch of electrical appliances.

Later in 1988, I had invitations to East China Normal University in Shanghai (the ‘Normal’ in these universities means dedicated mainly to teacher education), and to Hangzhou University, both of which cities I wanted to go to for touristic reasons. In the end, I went to neither. The first fell through because, after accepting, there was an outbreak of typhoid fever in Shanghai. Local Hong Kong advice was to postpone. My mistake was that I was frank. Instead of saying I was ill so I’d have to postpone, I said I didn’t want to be ill, so I’d have to postpone. They took offence and didn’t offer a postponement.

Wang Zhong-ming, Professor of Psychology at Hangzhou University (not his real name), was a smooth, good-looking, personable man. He visited my department and I invited him home. He told stories of the Cultural Revolution, during which he, as the son of an academic, was sent to a remote village to be re-educated. I told him about my work; he professed interest in the new Chinese versions of the LPQ and SPQ. He wanted to use them: let’s do some joint research, he suggested. He would invite me to Hangzhou and on the strength of that invitation I could hit the Vice-Chancellor’s fund for a visit. Why not? thought I, Hangzhou’s West Lake is famed for its beauty.

I dropped him at Kai Tak Airport at Departures, which is where I usually dropped visitors. He could pick up a trolley and trundle his gear about twenty metres to the airline counter. I would then continue on my way: no need to park my car, all very quick and expedient. But Zhong-ming told me he would wait while I parked, after which I could walk back, help him load his cases onto a trolley, trundle the twenty metres to the airline counter, and help him unload. I decided to comply, but was rapidly reaching the conclusion that the village to which he had been banished during the Cultural Revolution was not remote enough, and that it had failed to re-educate Zhong-ming out of his bourgeois pretensions.

Soon after, we started negotiations for my trip, which confirmed there was a heap of re-education still to do: more than I cared to undertake. This bus driver in academic’s clothing sent the letter of invitation I needed, but included with it a shopping list: Gameboy for his son, a list of Chinese herbal medicines, a list of hardware and matching software, various articles of clothing, some books . . .

A couple of electronic rulers, even a Gameboy thrown in, sure, but *Sing Daan Lo Yan*, Father Christmas, I was not.

Our negotiations lapsed.

I'd been corresponding with a Professor Xi at Beijing Normal University, who'd invited me to give a talk at that institution. Meng Hong Wei, now graduated with a Hong Kong PhD, was at the Central Institute of Educational Research (CIER), also, invited me to visit CIER. This was also where the two leaders of the Early Childhood were employed. Further, in August 1990, IEA was holding their Annual Meeting at Qinghua University. So I had three good reasons to visit Beijing.

The meeting of IEA persuaded me to let go of being head of the Hong Kong Centre. President George Bush Snr had been seriously pissed off at the poor showing of US high schools in maths and science. So it was put to the meeting that the sampling procedures be changed in such a way that the sampling of schools in IEA studies to favour the performance of American students. No IEA members objected because major funding was at stake. I was tempted to object to this interference with existing sampling methods but I was warned not to. I'm ashamed to say I was relieved, despite my anger. The prospect of engaging these ultra-cool, smooth-tongued Ivy League Republican Party professionals in high stakes debate was daunting. Maybe this is why Australian politicians were rolled so easily when the Bush Family and their bullyboys forced their agenda on them on quite different issues.

A reception for us was held at the splendid Summer Palace. China was heavily into swing, big band style. The deputy director of CIER, a tall handsome man, was fanatical about ballroom dancing. He'd arranged for some pretty girls to be dance partners for us visitors. They looked terrified. A teenager was pushed into my arms. She was so delicate, so fragile, I felt she'd shatter: she couldn't dance, she couldn't speak English. After less than 30 seconds of this torture, the poor child fled back to the other girls. I felt bad, she felt bad, but the deputy director had a good laugh, which I suppose was the main thing.

Meng Hong Wei, an ex-student of HKU and a good friend, took me home for dinner with his wife and daughter. They lived in staff quarters in large apartment blocks. Meng's flat had two main rooms other than bathroom and a balcony. One room was for him and his wife, and the other room did all the functions: kitchen, living, dining and daughter's bedroom. He considered himself well off, and relatively speaking he was.

Appliances were expensive and difficult to obtain in the Peoples' Republic at that time, so each time he came back from Hong Kong or overseas, he would bring an appliance – microwave, hi-fi, video, or TV – and always something for his colleagues and, naturally, for the driver. That way his possessions were tolerated. Meng paid virtually no rent, school and health were free, so 90 per cent of his own and his wife's incomes went on food and clothing.

That visit helped me understand how things worked in the PRC. Your workplace was your universe, supplying almost everything. The lousy wages of 200 yuan or so a month (\$40 roughly) didn't mean unliveable poverty as it would have in the West. Your job slotted you. No job, you might as well not exist. It also explained why the leaders of the Early Childhood programme – who also worked at CIER, Meng's workplace – were so keen to take appliances back with them when they were in Hong Kong.

I visited CIER, where I met those two leaders of the Early Childhood study again. One was a striking Northerner, tall, shapely and a lovely face that belied the resolve of steel underneath. When I met her again this time, last year's steel was sheathed. She smiled in a way that should have warmed me all day, but somehow it didn't.

Now to my visit with Professor Xi at Beijing Normal University. I hadn't heard from her for weeks. I mentioned that to Meng. He made enquiries, discovering that Professor Xi had been appointed three weeks ago to Macau's University of SE Asia at Macau.

Macau! Why hadn't she told me? I'd come all the way to Beijing just to see her, for all she knew, when all the time she was an hour's jetfoil from Hong Kong. And how come the People's Republic was appointing senior staff at Macau's University when Macau was Portuguese until 1999?

All that notwithstanding, I thought I had better make myself known at Beijing Normal. One of Professor Xi's former colleagues took on the responsibility of looking after this strange Long Nose who'd suddenly appeared out of nowhere. He booked me into a large hotel – at Gung Wu's fund's expense – where Party delegates were housed when they came to Beijing. Not that it was posh; it was just huge. I had a large suite comprising lounge-room, bedroom and bathroom.

A graduate student, Xiao Tang, took me to the hotel. Xiao Tang was to be my guide for the rest of the stay. This meant she would take me to the dining room for every

meal, including breakfast. I felt I was imposing on her hugely: my hotel was half an hour's walk from her quarters. After the first day I tried to insist I go on my own. After a struggle, we finally agreed I'd have breakfast alone. It only dawned on me later that, far from being an imposition, this was a real treat for her. Mediocre as the hotel food was, it was far better than that provided in the student quarters.

Each meal, a waitress gracelessly dumped large bowls on the table: vegetable soup, fluffy white buns, a vegetable, one or two meat dishes, one or two extras. Between meals, a rich garlic flavour coated my mouth, very pleasant. I wasn't aware of much garlic in the food at the time. I've been unable to replicate that effect, try as I would.

Despite Professor Xi's absence and thanks to the head of department I duly gave my paper on SOLO at Beijing Normal University. After, I was taken to dinner at the Staff Club. The conversation naturally got around to Hong Kong. I mentioned that after 1997, when China would take over Hong Kong, it would be desirable to continue the use of English as the medium of instruction in Band 1 and 2 schools. I was shocked by the reaction of an older female professor. She'd been educated in the USA, had excellent English, and had impressed me with her liberal views, yet she banged the table with her fist. '*They will speak in Putonghua!*' she ordered.

Scary. But now China is in charge, let me report that many Hong Kong schools are teaching in Putonghua or Mandarin, but English is indeed still retained in the top schools.

On Sunday, Xiao Tang and a staff member were deputed to look after me all day. I insisted I would be happy to look after myself. The staff member had a young family and must have been mightily brassed off to have to waste his only free day with this drop-in stranger, but he certainly didn't give me that impression. Particularly when he insisted we eat at the recently opened Kentucky Fried Chicken in Beijing. He and Xiao Tang were over the moon. I didn't tell them it was nowhere near as good as Western Kentucky Fried, and rotten value when compared to what Chinese food you can get at the same price. I guess they were as keen to eat Western as I was to eat Chinese.

Xiao Tang and her boyfriend, a Science graduate student, asked me to go dancing that evening. I said I couldn't dance; I didn't want a repeat of the poor girl at the Summer Palace reception.

'Come and watch then! You'll love the place. It's where we live, the Minorities' Community Hall.'

The Minorities' Community Hall was huge with classic pointy gables. Xiao Tang, her boyfriend and the other students lived underneath where the sleeping quarters were. They showed me their quarters, six per small room, in tiered bunks.

'Are Hong Kong students' quarters as good as this?' Xiao Tang asked proudly.

I could only reply: 'Quite similar, but maybe four per room would be more common...'

It was a different world: I couldn't possibly tell them how Hong Kong students really lived.

On top of their quarters were four enormous dance floors, one per story, each with a massive forties-style big band, *à la* Glenn Miller, the top floor open to the stars. Presumably the dance floors paid for the student accommodation, the students working as waitresses, barmen and partners.

Most couples were in formal dress, dancing with great skill, slow foxtrot, tango, quickstep, the big band at the end of the room all heavy brass, clarinets, saxophone. Upstairs, on the top floor, I laid my reservations aside. I danced a slow foxtrot under the stars: *slow, slow, quick-quick, slow* as I had learned from dancing classes when at school. In my arms was a graceful, exquisitely beautiful girl from Yunnan Province, lissom as a sapling, her smiling eyes as luscious as melting chocolate.

And we couldn't exchange a single word.

In my final months as Head of Department in 1991, I had a visit from Professor Wei, Vice President of Nanjing Normal University. He was drumming up enthusiasm for an International Conference on Educational Measurement they were hosting in December. Would I come and give a paper?

'Sorry, not my field,' I had replied. I'd already seen the flyer and had decided I didn't want to go as really it wasn't my area.

We then discussed my area. When we'd finished, he returned to the subject of the conference.

'If we arranged a workshop on the SOLO Taxonomy, in several secondary subjects of your choosing, involving curriculum officers and teachers, would you be interested then? Nanjing could become the Chinese Centre for your work!'

Well, that *does* tip the balance. ‘In that case, yes, I would be interested. It would be helpful if the teachers concerned were required to attend my conference paper ...’

‘Yes, yes, of course!’

‘And we could do the workshop immediately following the Conference itself.’

So it was agreed.

I arrived mid-afternoon at Nanjing Airport. You snatched your bag from a trolley and then strolled 50 metres or so to the gate. As I walked to the gate I heard a faintly remembered low buzz overhead... could it be a Tiger Moth? I wondered. No, but similar: a large, heavy biplane was flying low, at about 30 mph, it seemed. We oldies always got a touch of the *déjà vu* in the China of only twenty years ago: the hotel rooms with heavy drab furnishings, a desk with nib pen and inkwell, austerity, all recalling the era of the biplanes. Even just ten years later it was a very different story.

We were taken by bus to Nanjing Normal University. Outside, there was a large banner hung across the street, making a statement in English and in Chinese: *Nanjing Normal University Gives a Very Warm Welcome to our Distinguished International Visiting Scholars!*

We checked in at the campus accommodation for nonChinese visitors. It was basic, but US\$10 more per night than the original brochure had indicated. Ah well, the Vice Chancellor was paying for it; it was still only \$45 or so.

We had a terrific dinner, endless bottles of a very drinkable beer kept reappearing on the table. I was delighted to see old friends there: John and Daphne Keats, now both retired from Newcastle Uni but still active, and Robbie Case from OISE.

In my room after dinner, I was reading the papers for the morning conference. There was a knock on my door. I opened it to find a girl standing there. She had an attractive face, a lightly freckled nose, a mane of curly hair, large tilted eyes.

‘I am a translator. I wish to discuss your paper? Very urgent. Tomorrow I translate simultaneously.’

All sorts of thoughts rushed through my head ... well, just one line of thought to tell the truth. Was this a PRC way of entertaining foreign guests? Surely not, this was the highly moralistic PRC. Feeling uneasy, I and this disturbing girl sat on my bed. We discussed how to translate some technical terms she hadn’t understood.

And that’s all.

The papers next morning were in Chinese. Most of those being presented from other Chinese universities were mostly about the measurement theory, and measurement of individual differences. By Western standards this was outdated by a lag of about twenty years. I guessed this was due to the unavailability of modern texts and lack of communication. I and two others were the only nonChinese present at this session, and there were three translators present, including my visitor of last night. The chairman decided that instead of alternating Putonghua and English, the translators would whisper the English translation into our ears.

My visitor of last night, smelling faintly of garlic and a tantalising fragrance I couldn't name, whispered closely into my ear. She asked questions, ensuring I had understood. The papers were excruciatingly boring. But I was enthralled.

The conference dinner was a splendid affair; interesting food, full flavoured, oily, some spice but not as blasting as Szechuan, the never ending bottles of beer augmented by a wonderful rice wine of daunting strength. John Keats and I, now the best of friends, drank copiously to old times. Suddenly the organisers appeared and shooed us off: 'The concert! You must leave for the concert. Special for you.'

Given my recent intake of alcohol, with no time for easing the pressure, I decided to sit in the back row of the concert hall so I could sneak out quietly for the pee that was due any moment.

'No, you sit in front!' Professor Wei seized my arm and dragged me away. 'You distinguished visitor. We have armchair in front row for you.'

I was steered forcefully into an armchair in the very front row, with nice lace doilies draped on the arms. I was hemmed in to the bitter end.

The concert was given by the Music School, some traditional Chinese music, some Western. The singers of Western music were mainly tenors and sopranos and marvellous voices they were too; they'd win a place in any opera company. The programme looked interestingly different. There was an aria called 'Puccini', composed by a Nessun Dorma; another item was called 'Verdi', by D. Quella Pira.

By this time my distended bladder was shouting for relief but to leave would be a grave solecism. At the end of the concert, I was in agony. To hell with protocol or polite thank yous, I dived for the exit.

I stood on the path outside, looking around wildly. I had no idea where I was or where our quarters were. I saw a student residence. There must be a loo there, I thought. I entered the foyer to shrieks from female staff. It was a female dormitory. Slab-faced security guards strode towards me, fingers pointing, uttering stern admonitions in Putonghua, seemingly unsurprised that a depraved Westerner would so blatantly prey on virtuous Chinese girls.

I sped on my bursting way. The bushes were brightly lit, but by this stage I was willing to risk being charged with indecent exposure; at least it was a lesser charge than attempted rape. Then the main building loomed into sight. Toilets!

Three days into the conference and there was no word about my workshop. I only had two days to tee it all up. I'd already given my paper and I was certain there were no teachers from the Curriculum Department there as I had been promised. I sought out the contact person Professor Wei had nominated. He was evasive.

'Talk to me later. Now we are busy with the conference.'

Okay, I'd try again on the penultimate day. That would leave time. Just.

But on the last day of the Conference I still hadn't received any sort of reply about the promised workshop. I grabbed my contact and tried some assertion. He was equally blunt.

'We have this important conference to attend to! How can we spare the time to organise a workshop? You must come again at some more suitable time.'

That morning I had gone for a run. There was a park nearby where locals took their birds for a 'walk'. I found several birds in their little bamboo cages hung from trees. The smog created a mist, which was highly atmospheric. The Chinese love their birds. In Hong Kong, I often saw old men walking the birds in little cages, just like these. But I then saw what I hadn't seen in Hong Kong and hope I never do: old men flying their birds, Nanjing-style. They tie a string around one leg, let the bird out of its cage and allow it to fly round and round in circles, like kids with self-propelled toy aeroplanes.

I now know what those Nanjing birds felt like. We had the prospect of something we both want dangled in front of us – the bird freedom, me the Chinese Centre for SOLO – and there never was any chance that either of us would get it.

Note: This chapter refers to Chinese universities as they were more than twenty years ago, when they were just beginning to climb out of the bad times. They are very different indeed today. The Chinese economy has advanced hugely: technological advancement has been enormous, and a lot of money has been spent on tertiary education. When you have a population of one billion plus, the top .1 per cent still gives you large numbers of extremely intelligent people, and some Chinese universities are world class. Just to compare where China stands today, in comparison with Hong Kong itself and with Australia, let us look at the top 50 universities in the world, according to QS World University Rankings for 2011.⁷⁷ The first 20 universities are from the UK and USA, then for Australian, Hong Kong and Chinese universities we have:

- 22: The University of Hong Kong
- 26: Australian National University
- 31: University of Melbourne
- 37: Chinese University of Hong Kong
- 38: University of Sydney
- 40: Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
- 46: Beijing University
- 47: Qinghua University
- 48: University of Queensland
- 49: University of NSW

700 universities are listed, so to be included in the top fifty is very impressive.

⁷⁷ <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings>

Chapter 15

Multiskilling in a Single Purpose Institution: The Hong Kong Institute of Education

My first major consulting job in Hong Kong after I had officially retired was in November, 1995, when the Director of the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIED), Professor C. K. Leung, contacted me. I had known Professor Leung previously as the Dean of Arts at HKU. A pleasant man, he was a geographer with expertise in traffic management. He was due for a senior Civil Service post in traffic control, which of course is a major problem in Hong Kong, but for some reason he was passed over. He was owed one. So he was appointed Director of a new consortium of teachers' colleges, which became the Hong Kong Institute of Education, or *Gau Yuk Hok Yuen* in Cantonese. *Gau yuk*, carelessly pronounced the way a *gwailo* might, sounds like 'dog meat'. This is a coincidence that is worth noting.

The HKIED was designed to revolutionise teacher education in preparation for the Education Commission reforms in 2000, in which the old examination dominated system would give way to criterion-referenced assessment and constructivist teaching approaches. Basic teacher education in Hong Kong would therefore need thoroughly revamping and the new HKIED was the instrument for doing it. It would be situated in a brand new custom built campus in Tai Po in the New Territories and in time would be upgraded to university status. In 1996, however, when I first visited, administration was housed in an office tower in Causeway Bay, the teaching being carried out in five colleges all over Hong Kong. The Director was currently having problems. The old teachers' colleges were very traditional and their staff generally were resistant to change. Some teachers there were wholeheartedly in favour of the new approach but they were a minority, submerged in the old teachers' college culture.

Unfortunately, CK, a good geographer, knew little about teacher education. His deputy, K. C. Pang, lately of Curriculum Studies and deputy dean of Education for all the

while I was at HKU, did. But KC, a very nice man, ever-smiling, worked on the basis of power-distance: you don't argue with your superiors. Which meant he never challenged CK's decisions on teacher education when they should have been challenged.

CK took the direct approach to the staffing problem. He sacked nearly half of the old guard, appointing in their stead well qualified staff, many from overseas. The latter provided the rhetoric of reflective teaching and student centred learning, but those remaining from the old culture were occupying roles as senior administrators and department heads – and they saw that nothing changed in practice. Morale was rock bottom. KC Pang smiled on a wide front but not wide enough to cure that problem.

CK therefore sought external advice. He'd read an article of mine where I'd briefly referred to single purpose teacher education institutions, or 'normal' universities, which are common in China and were once common in Europe. CK, heading what was likely to become a normal university, asked if I would be interested in doing a consultancy, with special reference to a single purpose teacher education institution. I thought that with careful and expert planning, and with the resolution of the morale problem, this new institution might well become an exemplar of how teacher education should be carried out. Which is what I told him. He invited me over in May, 1996.

I was to review the structure and management of the HKIED and write a confidential report with recommendations. He stressed that my report was to remain confidential to him. I was given an office in Causeway Bay and told to interview samples of people at all levels, from highest to lowest. This I did.

I discovered appalling problems, not only of morale but of unworkable structures. One such was a thing called the Matrix. Not the filmic version but almost as deadly. The Matrix generated as many meetings as there were hours in the day. There were departments (multiplied by five campuses, although that hideous complication would be a nonissue in a year or so), programmes, and divisions, with committees drawn from each, but no hierarchy as to what committee finalised what decisions. So the Director ruled he would chair all of them and prioritise the decisions himself.

I handed my 20,000 word report to CK. He looked askance at this bulky document. He asked me to take him through it. I started with all those meetings.

'CK, you must delegate. It's not physically possible for you to chair all those meetings.'

‘I know. My doctor has told me I am killing myself.’ He looked at me mournfully. ‘But what can I do? I can’t trust them to make these important decisions.’

Have it your own way, I thought. I gave him my report to read in detail, with my recommendations, a major one being to get rid of that crippling Matrix, another to create a staff development unit. The expected Education Commission Report foreshadowed a very different style of schooling (see pp.BBB). If HKIEd, staffed mainly from the teachers’ college, was to train teachers for this new system, they would need considerable staff development because many existing staff were used to preparing teachers for the old chalk-and-talk teaching and the rigid examining that had until very recently characterised Hong Kong schools. The teachers’ college staff had themselves relied heavily if not exclusively on lecturing and examinations. The whole organisation, from the top down, needed to be run with a philosophy of teaching that was consistent with the new approach.

Given all that, and once the morale and organisational problems had been overcome, I really thought that the Hong Kong Institute of Education could become a showcase of teacher education in SE Asia. But if this were eventually to be so, it would not be with CK as Director, for his contract wasn’t renewed.

He did however leave two lasting legacies: a massive house for the Director raised at the far end of the new campus, glaring down and along the length of the campus like a watchtower, and a cunningly hidden running track, carved into the lower walls of the campus so as to be invisible from the top, where future directors could have their daily jog safe from prying eyes.

The new Director was Ruth Hayhoe, a Canadian from the renowned Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), who brought with her a strong reputation in comparative education with special reference to China. It was thought a *gwailo* would never get the job, because HKIEd mostly prepared primary teachers who taught in Cantonese. But Ruth was fluent in both Cantonese and Putonghua. She impressed mightily when she arrived in 1997: she gave speeches first in English, then in Cantonese, then in Putonghua. ‘Wah!’ everyone exclaimed. The only downside was that her speeches lasted three times longer than they otherwise would have done.

Ruth was going to do wonders for the place. She appointed Lee Wing On, who I’d appointed as a lecturer in the HKU Department of Education, to the Dean of the School of

Foundations of Education. Wing asked me to head up a new educational psychology department in his School for two years minimum. I would have been prepared to give one year max, but not unreasonably that wasn't acceptable. I suggested Phil Moore instead, ex-colleague from Newcastle and a co-author of *Process of Learning*. Phil accepted the post.

Ruth then proceeded to appoint a string of external advisory professors, including one J. Biggs, who joyfully accepted. I was to visit over the next couple of years, expenses paid, to dispense pedagogic wisdom. She also advertised for the head of a new staff development centre. One Catherine Tang applied; she took up appointment in August, 1998.

Things could hardly have been cosier.

I met Ruth for the first time in June 1998, on my first visit as an advisory professor. Doubting that CK would have left my report lying around, I gave her a copy. I pointed out that it was confidential to the Director, but as she was now Director it was appropriate she should look at it. Although slightly out of date, there were still recommendations she might find pertinent. I mentioned that the staff development unit was already in place, but that the crippling Matrix had still to be simplified, and the structure, content of and delivery of programmes needed to be based on a theory of teaching that was completely lacking to date, .

She smiled, accepted my report, and that was the last I heard from her about it or about anything else of any importance. I suppose she thought that advisory professors shouldn't be handing out advice so freely.

The Education Commission produced their expected report in 2000, decreeing that schooling should change in teaching and assessment methods, along the lines I'd been pushing for years.⁷⁸ Banding was to be abolished (it wasn't, but at least it was reduced from five bands to three); the curriculum was to be revised, with emphasis on enjoyment of learning, life-long learning, and creativity; assessment was to be flexible and 'broad-

⁷⁸ Biggs, J.B. (Ed.) (1996). *Testing: To educate or to select? Education in Hong Kong at the crossroads*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Educational Publishing Co. I analysed what was wrong with Hong Kong's educational system, with some suggestions as to how to put it right. The Education Commission's Report recommended changes that were gratifyingly close to those I'd suggested. Any resemblance must, however, have been coincidental as there was no mention of my book in the Commission's Report.

based', while 'excessive' tests, examination, dictation and drilling were to be eliminated. The teachers' colleges, now by fiat the HKIEd, had not been addressing these changes at all. The Government also had decided that teachers entering the profession should have graduate status: HKIEd was to phase out two year certificate programmes and move as rapidly as possible to full degree programmes. There was indeed massive staff development to do.

The HKIEd directorate ordered that those who were to teach in degree programmes were to undertake a Professional Development Programme (PDP), run by the Centre for Learning, Teaching and Supervision (CeLTS), Catherine's Centre. I agreed to provide several workshops in the PDP, focusing particularly on the crucial question: how a degree programme differs from a two year certificate programme. I focused on reflective practice, a key concept in modern professional education, and the alignment of curriculum and assessment, as was the case in the new Education Commission reforms.

The PDP caused a riot. Face was at issue. So was salary. Those who taught degree programmes were to be paid more, but instead of this being a carrot, it only made things more divisive. The directorate's approach had been too ham-fisted and it was Catherine who copped the flak, as she had to organize these compulsory workshops.

'We are the experts! We've been teaching for twenty years. Requiring us to attend the PDP is an insult!' the teaching staff raged to Catherine, both face-to-face and in emails.

In my workshops, I found the expat Brits in the English Department the most difficult. As I entered the classroom for the first time, one snorted: 'I'm here because I have to be. I know it will be a total waste of time.'

And it was, because he made it so. He read a book, holding it aloft so all could see what a fine protest he was making. Others kept up a low mumble so I used the old schoolie's trick: I stopped talking and, thus exposed, they stopped their mumbling. I was poised on a delicate balance between ignoring the rudeness or confronting it. Confronting it I thought would have been too heavy-handed, likely to create greater problems. I did toy with the idea of some reflective practice: 'What would *you* do if a student ostentatiously read a book in class? Here we have just that problem. How might we best handle this? Hmmm?'

I decided against this too because I knew how they'd handle the problem. They'd tongue-lash the student and banish him/her from the class – which would have earned me an unwinnable backlash. So I just continued as planned with my usual charm and wit.

They returned to their department and held a protest meeting about my workshop. The department head sent a list of complaints to me and to Catherine, saying essentially that they were already expert teachers. I replied (6/4/2000):

...each class I have taken has been a challenge, and if I were to repeat it, I would change several aspects of my teaching. I haven't got it right yet. I don't think we *ever* get it right; or if we do, it won't be right for the same course next time round. Students change, our knowledge base changes, the work place changes. I believe it's called reflective practice. ... If people say 'I am doing it right, as I have been doing for the past twenty years. I have nothing more to learn', then I am very sad. It means they have everything to learn.

Years later, the protester-with-the-book apologised to me. In the meantime, he had moved to another institution and has done some fine work on assessment. All of which backs up systems theory. As I'd found at Challney School years previously, a dysfunctional institution is likely to encourage individuals to behave in a dysfunctional way.

The directorate had realised the importance of preparing teachers for the new system. Or rather, the directorate realised the importance of giving the appearance of doing so. I was present at a meeting where teachers were asked to pledge in public, struggle session style, that they would attend at least two of the public meetings that the Education Commission had called to raise public consciousness of their new reforms. At those meetings they were to say what a wonderful job the Hong Kong Institute of Education was doing in preparing teachers for the new system.

In the campaign to help HKIEd attain university status, staff were required to do research just as the staff of a university are so required. A richly resourced Centre for Research and International Collaboration to coordinate staff research was established, through which all staff research projects had to be vetted.

Those without doctorates were strongly encouraged to enrol in doctoral programmes, mostly in the form of coursework doctorates in the form of EdDs. In one

department to which I was attached, 25 staff out of 43 – nearly 60 per cent – were doing higher degrees at the same time. The teaching load of those on doctoral leave was taken up by colleagues already flat chat doing their normal teaching, sitting on endless programme committees designing the new degree programmes that many hadn't taught before, and trying to do the research they were forced to do that for many was for the first time in their lives.

They weren't happy. An HKIEd slogan referred to 'the shared joy of learning and teaching', a phrase much used by the directorate. A senior teacher said to me over lunch: 'If I hear that phrase again, I'll scream.' They hadn't been finding the sort of shared joy in learning and teaching that I had found in my last years at HKU.

Here was an excellent example of how *not* to order things at institutional level. It told me that individual teachers reflecting on their own practice doesn't go far enough. Institutions need to be reflective too, developing procedures and structures, a total working system, which does the job it claims to do. This prompted me to present a paper on this subject, subsequently published,⁷⁹ at the annual conference of the HK Educational Research Association. Appropriately, HKIEd was the host that year, but those present weren't listening.

Here was a single purpose institution, whose sole reason for existing was to educate young people for the teaching profession. The Institute was lavishly funded, in a magnificent building built like a huge liner steaming into the foothills of a glorious mountain range. It seemed to have everything going for it. The fact that it wasn't working was not the fault of any one individual not doing his or her job properly – although the buck does have to stop somewhere – so much as the fact that systemic problems affecting the working of the institution as a whole hadn't been addressed. Alignment between institutional goals and institutional practice had been shot to pieces.

I drew attention to this in my final report as advisory professor, which I fully expected would not be read, or if it was, would not be acted on – but an advisory professor's gotta do what an advisory professor's gotta do. I pointed out that the dreaded Matrix had been modified slightly, but not essentially. 'Divisions' were now 'schools', which only complicated the issue of where the buck stopped. The method of resourcing

⁷⁹ Biggs, J.B. (2001). The reflective institution: Assuring and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. *Higher Education*, 14, 221-238.

put schools in conflict with each other. To justify their existence they put on identical modules under different names. One department of 43 teachers had to service 190 different modules, or to be more accurate, about ten modules under 190 different names. But to rationalise the method of resourcing would have been to upset the balance of power between schools and departments. It was equivalent to expecting them to vote to lower their own salaries.

CeLTS, Catherine's Centre, should have been the engine-room for reflective practice on an institution-wide basis. HKIEd's mission was clear, and all those decisions on course structure, teaching and assessment practice should have been taken with one thing in mind: teaching in the way future teachers would be required to teach. CeLTS could have helped make that happen. Instead, it was seen as a threat by the old guard and marginalised. The directorate in a mission statement defined quality teaching as being up to date with educational technology, which was rather making the means the end. Staff development was seen as a band aid when things went wrong, not as a continuing means of keeping them going right.

Whatever was said about the joy of learning and teaching, the default teaching method was lecturing, one department doing so in 3-hour slots *continuously*, as I was told by a disgusted member of that department. All teaching rooms had PA systems built in. I'd heard these going full blast to classes of only twenty or so. Paul Morris, previously Dean of Education at HKU, was appointed Deputy Director in 2000 and one of his first acts was to order the removal of the classroom PA systems, those enemies of good teaching.

The lifestyle in Tai Po was fabulous. Catherine had a magnificent flat in the HKIEd staff quarters, with a huge bedroom/sitting room overlooking HKIEd and the Pat Sing Leng Range, with Plover Cove shimmering in the background. Her parents had their own sitting room; there was a big lounge downstairs with a large balcony for entertaining. I loved sneaking out the back of the complex and clambering up to the razorbacks of Pat Sing Leng with its incredible views on all points of the compass, the HKIEd itself a Lego toy at my feet. Or I could jog along the seafront to Tai Po itself, via a Chinese garden where people practised traditional Chinese musical instruments. Catherine and her family liked me to drive them to the restaurants at the nearby fishing village of Sam Mun Tsai, or to the more upmarket restaurants at Tai Mei Tuk, Plover Cove. The husband of one of

Catherine's staff ran a restaurant in Tai Po that served the best dan-dan noodles outside Szechuan Province. Our life there was a wonderfully rich experience offset by a tragedy of lost opportunity.

HKIED had started out as a most promising experiment that by 2000 appeared to have crashed. However in 2002, Paul Morris became President and my old co-author Phil Moore his Vice-President. Things were billed to look up considerably, but as my term as advisory professor had expired, and Catherine had returned to the HK Polytechnic University to head up the Educational Development Centre, I learned of subsequent developments at HKIED from a distance.

In fact, it was easy: the newspapers were full of it.

The aim of most directors (now called 'presidents') had been for the HKIED to be granted university status, but none had been successful. Under Paul Morris, the Institute became self-accrediting but it had yet to be given full university status. Arthur Li, ex-Vice Chancellor of the Chinese University, was in 2002 Secretary for Education and Manpower. As a member of the Board of HKIED, he put enormous pressure on the HKIED to amalgamate with the nearby Chinese University, threatening to cut students numbers if they didn't agree. Morris claimed, but this was denied, that his contract as President would not be renewed if he didn't agree to amalgamating with Chinese U. However that may be, he did not agree – and he was not renewed in 2007.

This controversy became entangled with another. Li's colleague, Fanny Law, Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower, made several educational reforms, which led to considerable teacher stress – and in 2006 to two teacher suicides – to which Law replied: 'If the prime reason (for the deaths) is education reforms, why have there been only two teachers who have committed suicide?' The reforms – and her comments – drew outraged public criticism, in particular from four of Morris's staff who had publicly criticised the reforms. Law demanded that they be sacked. Morris refused to do so, claiming this was a grotesque threat to academic freedom.⁸⁰

These highly confused issues created a public storm such that a Commission of Inquiry was set up, mostly being a matter of trying to find out who had said what and to

⁸⁰ Morris's action led, five years later, to a forum on academic freedom organised by HKIED staff, at which it was urged that Morris deserved a statue to be erected at HKIED to honour his standing up to the government in the cause of academic freedom. (*South China Morning Post*, 28 February, 2012).

whom. Morris was cleared, Li was said to be an ‘unreliable’ witness and was not reappointed to the Government, and Law resigned from Education and Manpower. Morris returned to England where he is currently a professor at the London Institute of Education.

HKIED is now under a completely new administration but at the time of writing still hasn’t got university status.

This institution could have been – and might still be – a marvellous example of a model teacher education institution, aligned to its major purpose of providing quality teacher education in these rapidly changing times. However, it needs an overall philosophy to achieve alignment in all its functions: the intended outcomes should be clearly stipulated, the processes used should be those we know that would best achieve those outcomes. In early days, there was clear misalignment between its explicit mission and its obsession with teachers doing ‘research’ rather than keeping up to date with and improving their teaching. I have nothing against teacher doing research, quite the contrary, but in an institution dedicated to educating teachers, the teaching staff must themselves be exemplary models, Confucian style, for their students.

I tried to find out more about the present philosophy and practice, and the alignment between philosophy and practice, from the HKIED’s current website. I couldn’t find much. The ‘teaching and learning’ link in one department, to which I had previously been attached and had known well, led me to a policy document, the first item of which reads:

1. Students shall follow the deadline for submission of assignments and present themselves for tests, examinations and prescribed assessment activities at the appointed time.

So teaching and learning is all about a policy on assignments, tests and examinations. This is not quite what I had been hoping to see in a model institution for teacher education.

Chapter 16

A Constructive but Misaligned Retirement

I retired to the NSW Central Coast in July 1995. As I had work to do as a consultant and a book to write on constructive alignment, I had taken honorary attachments first to the School of Education at Sydney University, and later to the Professional Development Centre at the University of NSW, where I could keep my hand in from time to time and also have infrastructure available that would be helpful to a consultant. I wanted somewhere pleasant to live and convenient to Sydney: the Central Coast filled both bills. It is wonderfully endowed with walking trails that wound through angophora forests, those beautiful, burnt-orange coloured twisted trees peculiar to the Central Coast, taking you along a string of beaches separated by rocks and caverns into which the surf crashed, and onto a headland on top of which you stared straight at Barrenjoey Head, the Sydney CBD shimmering in the distance.

An hour's drive to Sydney – at the right time of day – took me to those university attachments. It was at the University of NSW where I came upon, first-hand, the effects on university teaching brought about by the savage cuts to university funding by the federal government. Professor John Niland, Vice-Chancellor and neoliberal to his bootstraps, saw support services as a waste of money. He gutted the Professional Development Centre where I was attached. I thundered my outrage in a letter (31 May, 1999):

Dear Professor Niland,

I wish to protest in the strongest terms about both the substance of the recent decisions concerning the marginalisation of the Professional Development Centre (PDC), and the appallingly insensitive manner in which they have been carried out.

At a time when there are fewer staff teaching ever larger classes, and when undergraduates are paying for and will be demanding quality teaching, it seems extraordinarily counter-productive deliberately to diminish the very quality controls that might have ameliorated an increasingly challenging teaching/learning context. A

university that has seriously weakened staff development in circumstances such as this is showing as much rationality and foresight as contained in a decision to throw all doctors overboard to lighten the aircraft when the pilot is having a heart attack.

The PDC at UNSW was amongst the first of its kind in Australian universities⁸¹ and has developed a first-class reputation. . . . Your decision evidently to over-ride your own advisers on this, to downgrade if not humiliate a group of dedicated fellow academics, to keep them in suspense for so long about their career paths, and to expect faculties to pick up the cost of employing them if they are to be retained, not only shows a demeaning lack of academic judgment, but a mean-spiritedness that augurs ill for the future of your University.

I am of course resigning my post as Honorary Visiting Professor, forthwith.

Professor Niland couldn't have given a rat's about what I thought of his management style or about my views on university teaching. But I saw that my letter was in *Campus Review*, the universities' paper, as an example of the way that economic rationalism, as Australians then called neoliberalism, was at that time destroying the quality of university teaching, while most academics just sat there like rabbits in a spotlight. Maybe what I had said gave someone reason to pause and reflect: a lecturer overwhelmed by the enormity of what was required, perhaps, or a student frustrated at having to sit on the stairs in over-crowded lecture theatres. I don't know but I hope it had some effect.

With cuts to the university sector in Australia biting deeper and deeper, money ironically became available for freelance consultants. The bean counters running the universities evidently saw that sacking some teachers, hiring younger and less experienced teachers as casuals, cramming students into larger and larger classes, and offering band aid by hiring freelance consultants, was rational economics. Maybe, but it was irrational education. Teaching quality was declining badly in many universities, and I believed that the constructive alignment design for teaching and assessment could help prevent that. So I became a wrinkled old jackal, prowling around the savaged, crippled universities, snapping up the odd consultancy.

My rationale for using constructive alignment in this context was this. Take two students, Susan and Robert. Susan is interested in her studies; she asks questions in

⁸¹ For the record, this was set up by Laurie Short who later became the Foundation Professor of Education at Newcastle.

lectures, she actually does the readings and exercises suggested; she takes the bricks dropped in lectures and in her reading to construct her own arch of knowledge. She uses a deep approach to learning. Now here is Robert. He is interested only in his meal ticket, not in the subject. In class, he only takes notes of those bricks he collects and memorizes them for the exam, but he doesn't actually make anything much with them. He doesn't raise questions or do extra reading. He uses a surface approach to learning. Multiple choice tests and exam questions answerable by memorising allow him to get away with that.

Susan is the better student because she engages in high level learning activities: questioning, reading, trying to see the big picture, doing her best to understand her studies. It doesn't much matter what teachers do when students like Susan are in their classes. In a lecture, she'll find answers to preformed questions, she'll reshape her arch of knowledge. Robert hears the same words as Susan but he doesn't see an arch or any shape in the making, just another brick factoid to be copied into his notebook. He believes that if he can record enough of these bricks and remember them on cue, he'll keep out of trouble come the exams. Teach and assess Robert in a way that *doesn't* allow him to get away with that but requires him to use higher order processes and he'll be more likely to start performing like Susan does. Good teaching is where you can get Robert to learn in a way that allows him to construct shapes and meaning, just like Susan does spontaneously. Constructive alignment helps in this because the teaching/learning activities require students, Robert included, to engage those higher level verbs that are defined in the intended learning outcomes.

Addressing the problem of how to do this in mega-sized classes was forced upon me by a graduate student at a workshop for beginning teachers at Newcastle, a university I enjoyed visiting after I'd left because I thought they needed to be straightened out on a thing or two. I was extolling the virtues of portfolio assessment.

'Come off it!' I was interrupted by an angry voice. 'I teach 600 first years, because no one else in the department will take them on. I'm the least experienced person here and I have my own PhD to do. Don't tell me I've got time to assess 600 individual portfolios. Multiple choice tests, machine marked, are the only way to go.'

I agreed she was in an impossible situation. Her colleagues, and especially her head of department, were showing criminal irresponsibility.

Why were teachers being subjected to these impossible demands? Why were universities in such a bad way?

Here was a story to be told. Several others also thought it should be told, notably Richard Davis, recently retired Professor of History at the University of Tasmania. We called the story ‘the subversion of Australian universities.’ Richard was puzzled and angry about the way academics had fallen on their swords at Tasmania, voluntarily yielding their power in Senate to the corporate managers of the place. We got together and invited other disillusioned academics to write their take on what had happened and was happening to Australian universities. Allen and Unwin were interested but they’d just published *Why Universities Matter*, edited by Tony Coady. Another publisher suggested we scrub all reference to the Orr Case because Cassandra Pybus had said all that there was to be said on that – a judgment with which we profoundly disagreed. All the other publishers we approached said our book was dated and non-commercial. Which being interpreted meant: Universities have entered a brave new era so get over it, no one’s interested in what a few disgruntled old farts think. This wasn’t the impression that I had obtained in my travels when talking to hundreds of still ungrunted young academics who were doing the hard yards.

Finally we published on the web, courtesy of Brian Martin of the University of Wollongong.⁸²

Apart from enjoying the fabulous scenery and bushwalking of the NSW Central Coast, I busied myself with *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, which outlined the design of constructive alignment and was first published by the Open University Press in 1999. The book did well, and when the editor of OUP, John Skelton, urged me to write a second edition, with marvellous serendipity John Spinks and Faradeh Salili of the Psychology Department at Hong Kong University contacted me. They had a sudden hole in the staffing of the MSocSci course for educational psychologists, a hole that fitted my shape. Would I be immediately available to fill in for a year? Just what I needed: I would now be able to try out what I would be advocating in a second edition. I had started university life in a psychology department and I would be finishing finally in a

⁸²Biggs, J. & Davis, R. (Eds). *The subversion of Australian universities*
<http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/dissent/documents/sau/>

psychology department. There's something very Chinese in seeing life as completing a circle. And the fact that Catherine was still in Hong Kong had something to do with my decision too.

I returned to teach at HKU in August 1999. I felt welcome from the outset. Politics didn't drive decision-making the way it had, and no doubt still did, in the Faculty of Education. People were work-oriented and respected the work of colleagues. The genial and collegial C. Y. Chiu was department head. Even when I did my usual, circulating memos sharply critical of current practice especially in regard to student assessment, the reaction was: 'This is after all his area of expertise, let's listen to what he has to say.' I could have been back in Canada, at the U of A in the good old days. Here, as in Canada, the focus was on academic collegiality: let's do the best job we can in our teaching and in our research and help colleagues do the same.

I taught three courses, a smaller half course and supervised half a dozen final year dissertations, a typical load. Five or so contact hours a week: compare that to the fifteen hours a week that many in Australian universities have to manage. I had time for research, writing, and, most important for me, teaching preparation. All the courses I was teaching were new and I wanted to try out new teaching and assessment techniques for the second edition of my book.

The students were brighter than I'd been used to, and so motivated. So many Susans! So many more annual reunion dinners! The best group were mature age students who had a degree and a career in another area and were doing a year's crash course, the equivalent of a major in psychology, in order to then do a master's programme in either a clinical or an educational psychology. In every case, their reasons were altruistic; they'd had enough of the commercial world and wanted to be useful in the lives of others. I was to be reminded many times over of that Hong Kong phenomenon: young people who were bright, cheerful and pleasant, the women sweetly feminine yet gutsy and determined. They seemed much more career/vocation oriented than my Australian students, but I must qualify that by saying that my knowledge of Australian students was twenty years out of date. I'm happy to learn that a new breed of altruistic and focused young people, of whatever ethnicity, is now emerging out of the Generation Ys.

The undergraduates were required to sit for an end-of-semester exam, as well as the usual midterm assignments. This was a challenge for me as I regard final exams as

damaging, but as I had to comply, I set open-end exam questions requiring little recall, rather like Jim Cardno's (p. DDDD). Nevertheless, the difference between an assignment and an exam script made me want to weep. Except for those of the very top students, the exam scripts were so obviously stress-driven, the pressures and the conditions of examining forcing most students into the same mould. The scripts read like they had been cloned, most exhibiting crabbed, pinched thinking, the same phrases and examples cropping up, rarely an original idea. But I could be *certain* that the script was indeed written by Student # 9798873, because I was there in the room, invigilating the poor thing, as she squeezed out this stuff that ironically was indistinguishable from that fed me by many other students in the exam room.

We had to submit our exam questions to be vetted by the external examiner in England. He took exception to my open style of questions. He asked that I reset the paper, with more reference to the classic experiments in educational psychology: mastery of the literature was *basic*, and needed to be examined *thoroughly*. I disagreed *completely*. Retelling factual details of classic experiments was asking for a narrow focus inviting memorisation. But more even than that, he was asking me to deliberately misalign my assessment with the stated course outcomes: and I'd just written a book on the importance of aligning them.

CY, my head of department, supported me and the examiner capitulated with good will. But he could have made things difficult for the department because the external's report is sent to Senate and a department head then has a 'please explain' to perform.

CY nominated me as Honorary Professor in the Department of Psychology, a position I still hold ten years later. I appreciate being appreciated. I also appreciate the irony that the title was conferred from psychology and not from education where I'd spent most of my life's work.

But then I was usually on the losing side when it came to educational politics.

Since my official retirement in 1995, I had been involved as either evaluator or consultant on several projects to do with tertiary teaching in Hong Kong. The first major project was the Action Learning Project run by David Kember of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The Action Learning Project helped teachers drawn from most Hong Kong universities to innovate in their teaching by providing resources, including young

academics employed as ‘critical friends’ so that teachers could bounce their ideas off them and more easily carry out reflective practice. It was very successful, both directly in improving the teaching of the teachers involved and more generally in alerting other teachers about the possibility of reflective practice and the benefits of innovative teaching.

Catherine returned to the Polytechnic University from Hong Kong Institute of Education to head up the Educational Development Centre in 2001. In 2002, she was awarded two large teaching development grants funded by the Universities Grants Committee (UGC): one project on implementing constructive alignment, which UGC rated their top priority and to which I was appointed chief consultant, and another on student assessment, to which I was appointed external assessor. However, the rules did not allow one to head two grants, so Catherine passed the assessment project to a colleague. I mention all this because, after seeming to have been in the educational dark ages for much of the twentieth century, innovation in teaching and learning in Hong Kong was becoming a major priority, not only at school level, as in the Education Commission report of 2000, but also in the tertiary sector, as the UGC’s funding of these and several other large scale teaching development grants illustrated. There were thus pressures for teaching reform from many sides. Kember’s Action Learning Project certainly stirred teachers up by getting them interested in researching their own teaching. – and getting publications from it.

There was also interest in outcomes-based education, although at that stage those noises were coming from the United States, where ‘outcomes’ were those at institutional level and used not for the direct betterment of teaching but for managerial purposes, such as benchmarking. It then dawned upon me that constructive alignment was also an outcomes-based model – but this was about outcomes at the classroom level, and involved teaching and assessment at the level of individual courses. The distinction between assessing outcomes for the purpose of quality assurance on the one hand, and defining learning outcomes as targets for immediate teaching and assessment on the other, is important. The first is reactive, the second proactive.

In May 15, 2006, the Chairman of UGC, Alice Lam, circulated a letter to all universities stating the UGC’s intentions in using outcomes-based approaches very plainly:

The UGC's goal in promoting outcome-based approaches is simple and straightforward – improvement and enhancement in student learning and teaching quality.

This letter is very clear about what sort of outcomes-based approaches are intended: the second proactive kind, for improving learning. Unfortunately, this became confused in some quarters with the first reactive kind, and is still causing confusion in Australia, as I discuss in Chapter 17.

At all events, the constructive alignment project at the HKPolyU saw to it that that institution was first to get going on outcomes-based teaching. Then in 2005, Professor Richard Ho of City University of Hong Kong approached me with a major project: the conversion over five years of the whole of CityU – some 2,000 individual courses – to what we called Outcomes-Based Teaching and Learning (OBTL), with constructive alignment as the model. Catherine and I would be general consultants, giving workshops in constructive alignment and in the implications for teaching and assessment. Many staff were not easily convinced. If they were to redesign their courses, they did not want generalists like us, but subject specific consultants who could speak their own content language. We recruited several subject consultants from Australia, the UK, and the US. By 2008, OBTL was gaining its own momentum and there was no need for outside consultants.

Other Hong Kong universities are proceeding at their own pace and in their own way in implementing outcomes-based teaching. There is some resistance to change, of course, but with strong encouragement from the UGC and with the momentum already there, my judgment is that tertiary teaching in Hong Kong is overall very good, and in some cases exceptional.

Which may go some way towards explaining why fewer international students from Hong Kong are heading towards Australian universities.

In 2001, Noel Entwistle of Edinburgh University, who had been working along similar lines to me over the years, told me that he had a large grant for his Enhancement of Teaching and Learning Project, in which constructive alignment was being used as a general framework for assessing good teaching environments in sixteen UK universities. Would I be a consultant? Most certainly I would. It was I hope a fruitful visit; it certainly was for me. The following year, I was invited by the Education Section of the British

Psychological Society to give the 2002 Vernon-Wall Memorial Lecture. Yes, that Wall: my erstwhile boss at NFER. I was delighted to be able to pay tribute to him, because it was he who really set me on my professional path (pp. BBB).

So there I was, back in London in a chilly November, in the area around the University of London, WC1, which was deeply familiar to me forty years previously. I went for a walk around Wimpole and Welbeck Streets, where NFER used to be. Little had changed, except things seemed rather cleaner and more upmarket than then.

Forty years ago, the Education Section Conferences of the BPS would attract around 200 participants. It had collapsed to forty, with a handful of visitors from overseas, which included an ex-colleague from Newcastle, minus the Mickey Mouse ears. He tore himself away from the bar to enter my talk halfway through. He was evidently a Marxist-anarchist no longer for he had joined the other side and was now on the University Council.

I was at Nottingham Trent University for one and a half days, to give four presentations. Two were scheduled in the afternoon of the first day, after which I was taken to a lavish dinner where New Zealand sauvignon blanc flowed like water. Walking back from the restaurant to my hotel, I saw an amazing sight. It was 7°, raining lightly and the students were partying. Girls were dressed in sleeveless, backless light blouses, as if it was midsummer. And the din they were making was incredible, singing, shouting, squealing. This continued into the small hours, making sleep impossible.

Next morning I gave a presentation, and was scheduled for a three-hour workshop in the afternoon. After the previous night of copious drafts of sauvignon blanc and lack of sleep, I was as rooted as any chilled-to-the-bone Nottingham girl. At the end of the second hour of the workshop, I had to call it quits. The first time I've given up from sheer exhaustion.

On that same trip, I spoke at a conference on excellence in teaching convened by Professor Norman Jackson of Surrey University. Someone later sent me a write up of the conference:

...it was interesting to hear an author talk about his work in a collegial and non guru-type fashion... The humble but self assured manner in which John spoke with and to his colleagues left me convinced I must read more....⁸³

I'll drink to that – but not litres of sauvignon blanc this time.

At the 1998 Annual Conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, I was warned that I would have to make a speech. My friends from previous visits to Queensland University of Technology, Barry Dart and Gillian Boulton-Lewis, had compiled a *Festschrift*.⁸⁴ They'd invited some who'd been working in my area to write something about the current state of play in their own work where mine might have impinged on theirs. An old friend from Armidale days, Mick Dunkin, wrote the Preface in which he said:

A search of the Social Sciences Citation Index evidences the fact that John Biggs is among the world's leaders of research on learning and cognitive processes in institutional settings...

Thanks so much for going out on a limb for saying what you said. And thanks too to: Barry and Gillian, for organising and contributing to it, and to David Kember, Elaine Martin, Paul Ramsden, Eric Meyer, Noel Entwistle, Catherine Tang, David Watkins, John Hattie, Nola Purdie, Ference Marton, Mike Prosser and Keith Trigwell, for your chapters respectively.

Here is part of what I said in response:

This means far more to me than an emeritus professorship or any other academic honour I can think of. My university career has had some ups and downs, the downs mainly of a political nature. I have always hated politics and never tried to play that game, not out of virtue but because I am no good at it. In later Newcastle days it was getting to be impossible not to play politics, so I left rather than having to do so. Mind you, you might

⁸³ *Educational Developments*, Issue 3.4, pp. 10-11.

⁸⁴ Dart, B. & Boulton-Lewis, G. (Eds.) *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. Camberwell, Vic.: Australian Council for Educational Research, 1998.

think going to a dying British colony was a strange choice in those circumstances, but it turned out, eventually, to have been completely right, in so many ways. I can think of no better summary and conclusion to a person's life text than to have a public tribute such as this from those whom I myself admire and respect so much.

Chapter 17

Universities: Sixty Years of Change

Universities have the same general mission wherever they are. Their very name suggests the universality of knowledge. Universities are charged with creating and publishing knowledge about our physical and social world according to the generally accepted rules of scholarship, and to teach that knowledge to the next generation. There is however considerable freedom within that mandate to carry out the task of scholarship in different ways, and with different emphases on teaching, research and professional preparation. Furthermore, different countries would see different bodies of knowledge as essential to their own culture. Universality thus becomes tinged with local characteristics.

The relationship between teacher and student is another difference that has local characteristics, as I had discovered, particularly in Hong Kong and China. In the West that relationship is professional and academic, occasionally personal, whereas in Confucian heritage countries, such as Hong Kong and China, it is personal and pastoral as well as academic. The head of department's role is also different between East and West: in the West it is as academic leader but is now becoming increasingly managerial, whereas in the East it is, or rather was twenty years ago, paternalistic and pastoral.

Then there are not only differences between the American, Australian, British, Canadian and European models of the university, but within each country there are differences between various classes of university. Thus, while universities have a general mission, there are diverse ways of realising it.

I shall now review how in my experience universities and the academic scene generally have changed over the years, focusing on the Australian situation.

Australian universities over the twentieth century

The Universities of Sydney and Melbourne were established in the 1850s, roughly along Oxbridge lines with residential colleges, Adelaide followed in 1874, Tasmania in 1890, Queensland in 1909 and Western Australia in 1911. These were originally state run and are today's 'sandstone universities', the oldest universities in each state and built in gothic

style after their British models. However, each state had different ideas about what a university should be and its relationship to the community. Members of some university councils had strong feelings of ownership over ‘their’ university, how it should be run and what the academic staff should be doing. Research was not generally regarded as an essential ingredient of a university’s activities and it was for this reason that what is now known as the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) was founded in 1926.

These state-run universities mostly focused on teaching the basic disciplines, with arts and science as the dominant faculties, some professional education in the prestige areas such as medicine, law and engineering, and whatever other concentrations of scholarship or professional preparation the university councils, comprising local dignitaries, saw as appropriate to local needs. The universities of Sydney, Melbourne and later Western Australia, were generously endowed at first but the University of Tasmania was poorly financed and more than usually parochially governed. The lay Council in Tasmania felt as they were paying the piper they should call the tune, often over-riding academics on strictly academic issues. The 1954 Royal Commission came about precisely because of lay interference in what should have been academic matters. However, the Commission’s recommendations were not acted upon by Council but rather became the prick that goaded Council into extracting revenge from dissident staff. Professor Sydney Orr was the first to be summarily dismissed – an act that was cloaked in respectability on the grounds that Orr had seduced a student. However, that backfired and after ten years during which the Chair of Philosophy was declared black, a settlement was reached.

Australian universities were at that time quite uneven academically, administratively and financially, as exemplified by the shenanigans in Tasmania. Prime Minister Menzies was determined to strengthen the university sector and bring universities under Commonwealth control and financing. He commissioned the 1957 Murray Report, which concluded that the university sector should have three main aims:

- to provide for ‘more highly educated people in all walks of life’ but especially more university graduates.
- to assert two central aims of universities: the education of graduates, and to conduct ‘untrammelled’ research to discover knowledge for its own sake.

- to regard universities as the guardians of intellectual standards and of intellectual integrity in the community.

There followed a period of university expansion, with new universities such as Monash, La Trobe, Macquarie and Murdoch.

Although I personally was in the wrong job at Monash, that university itself was typical of the best of the new no-nonsense universities despite being waylaid at first by a burst of student activism. Monash and the other new universities espoused the traditional academic role based on fundamental, interest-driven research and its publication including through teaching. Professional preparation at the undergraduate level was usually restricted to medicine, law, and engineering, with some locally significant professions such as agricultural science in New England.

The University of New England itself was something of an anomaly. In my time there, UNE was a mix of out-sourced Britishness and rural Australianness: a culture where it was mandatory to wear gowns when attending lectures, and to live in residential colleges with high tables and moral tutors, dropped into the rural culture of the rolling New England Tablelands. While UNE specialised in rural science and agricultural economics, at the same time it boasted strong classics and English departments, amongst others.

This Australian take on the classic British model was however insufficient for educating professionals in the modern world. While post-secondary education was needed for the full range of professions, it would have been too expensive for universities to take on this role of professional preparation for all. Accordingly, in 1967 Menzies commissioned the Martin Report, which proposed the introduction of colleges of advanced education (CAEs). CAEs were state owned and controlled instead of being federally funded and independent. They at first offered only shorter sub-degree courses awarding certificates and diplomas in such professions as teaching, nursing, agriculture and pharmacy. CAEs were therefore designed to complement universities, providing professional education on a larger scale and for a wider variety of professions than universities alone could provide. Thus was a binary system established. CAEs nevertheless soon began offering degrees, then postgraduate and even doctoral awards in a few institutions. CAE staff were not required to undertake research and were on lower pay

scales than their university counterparts. Seeing themselves as second class citizens, they lobbied for equality with universities, including equal pay. The division and even enmity thus created led to the sort of results we saw in Newcastle in Chapter 10.

I rather fancy that the shambles at the University of Newcastle may have provided the sort of justification Labor Education Minister John Dawkins would have been seeking for him to take his axe from the woodshed and hack into the tertiary system as a whole. Certainly, by the 1980s, universities were inefficient, were wasting public money, and contained a lot of deadwood as too many academics had become lazy and complacent. The system needed cleaning up, which Dawkins controversially did by abolishing the binary system. Amalgamations were forced between selected institutions, the remaining colleges of advanced education were called universities, while the management and offerings of the universities were restructured as if they were colleges of advanced education.

But there was more to all of this than just one feral minister of education. Under the Hawke-Keating era of Labor government Australia had joined Britain and the United States in their obsession with neoliberalism, or economic rationalism, a dogma that makes the market the ultimate decider of all major issues, including education. Prime Minister Thatcher had ruled that since education is a private good, you should pay for it yourself. Whereas in the past British and Australian students did not have to pay significant fees, now they did, international students full fees. Universities tended to become shops selling a commodity called 'knowledge', the market deciding what particular parcels of knowledge were most saleable, and hence what courses should be run and, the other side of that coin, what should be run down. Departments that trained people for jobs in high demand survived, and those that didn't were in trouble. Classics, basic science and mathematics courses were decimated, becoming virtually extinct in some universities, while hospitality and tourism, information technology, business and marketing flourished. Like politics, universities had become poll-driven. The idea that universities were the guardians and nurturers of the basic disciplines had all but gone.

Dawkins' transformation of the tertiary sector might have been brutal and nonconsultative but matters became worse in 1996 when John Howard became Prime Minister. He dismissed academics as 'elites' who were divorced from the 'real' world; he cut public funding of universities to the bone before they were able to find alternative

sources of funding. Australian universities had no tradition of donations and endowments from grateful alumni, unlike American and British universities. This was the period I mentioned in the previous chapter when class sizes became grossly inflated following staff dismissals and redundancies. Casual and often inexperienced teachers filled the more glaring gaps in staffing courses. Teaching quality crashed. As indicated in the previous chapter, ad hoc consultants like me were hired in a vain attempt to fix the problems, or rather, to give the impression that the problems were being fixed. Milking international students was the only way many universities stayed afloat. Public funding of universities when I was at Newcastle was around 95 per cent: Howard saw it cut to below 40 per cent, one of the lowest figures in OECD countries.

Things became so bad that the Australian Senate held an Inquiry into higher education in 2000, the report appearing in August the following year. The terms of reference included adequacy of current funding and the quality of teaching and research. The Committee could not reach agreement. The majority report, *Universities in Crisis*, claimed that there was indeed evidence of unmistakable deterioration in the quality of teaching, of learning and of research, for which funding cuts were largely responsible. The minority report, by Liberal members of the Inquiry, whose party was responsible for the more savage cuts, disagreed on virtually all points. Liberal Senator John Tierney presented the minority view on Radio National's *Australia Talks Back*, only to initiate a flood of calls from outraged academics. One said that he was required to mark 350 examination papers in five days, and when he complained this was not possible, his dean told him: 'You must know your students! Give an estimate, based on their term's work.' When finally the caller submitted his grades, he was asked to re-mark all failed international students, but not to waste his time on failed HECS students because they paid lower fees. Users at the coalface, both staff and students, presented story after story about breaches of academic propriety enforced by senior administrators. Government spokespeople dismissed these stories as unsupported, inaccurate and self-serving.

Yet it was exactly such impropriety that had got Newcastle University in hot water as outlined in Chapter 10 above.

Australian universities today

The second phase in the transformation of our universities started in the early 2000s when alternative sources of funding became available. International students alone became a multi-billion dollar source of income, both locally and offshore particularly in Asia, although later in the noughties that supply dropped off alarmingly for two reasons: Asian universities, and particularly in Hong Kong and China, were as good or better than most Australian universities, so why should they go to all that expense, especially when a burst of racism in the form of physical attacks on international students alarmed potential students? Local students in turn were required to pay higher fees than previously, and industry was tapped to fund research. The monetary supply thus improved but private funding can compromise teaching, assessment and research because a monetaristic value system replaces an academic one.⁸⁵

The government strongly encouraged universities to accept a wider range of school leavers than previously, which they were happy to do because more students meant more fees. Universities accordingly provide wider ranges of professional and vocational courses to cater for this broader student population. In practice most universities are now primarily teaching institutions, even if it is widely thought that academic respectability is conferred by research eminence; appointments and promotions are still largely determined in many universities by research productivity rather than teaching quality. In the eyes of the general public and of students, however, the real purpose of most present day universities is teaching, despite any rhetoric that might suggest otherwise.

The nature of the governance and administration of universities has therefore changed, many of their functions actually undermining what were once uniquely academic functions. Universities have in effect become businesses, very large and lucrative businesses in some cases, and are run accordingly as businesses.

In the older universities, the vice-chancellor was an academic, *primus inter pares*, the first amongst equals, and deans of faculties were elected by the academic staff from their own ranks. Decisions about teaching and courses were made by academics at departmental meetings and then faculty board, within their established budget constraints, and ratified in an academic senate. This is not to say that government by academics always worked as it should – Newcastle and Hong Kong providing examples where it sometimes didn't work – but the bottom line was always academic.

⁸⁵ <http://www.bmartin.cc/dissent/documents/sau/sau12.pdf>

That has now changed. Current university governance is hierarchical, with top down decision-making by administration, not by academics. The vice-chancellor, who may not even be an academic primarily, is aided by a range of pro-vice-chancellors responsible for different functions like international students, graduate studies, grounds and parking, student affairs, teaching and learning and so on. Deans are appointed, not elected by academics as previously, and may come from a business rather than an academic background. These senior administrators prepare mission statements and strategic plans; they determine what programmes and courses are to be run, and they design key performance indicators for ‘quality assurance’ (see below). Heads of departments act as line managers for their academic staff. These changes may in part be seen as necessary given the massively increased size of universities compared to what they were, but that is not the main reason: the commercial demands of self-funding have seen that universities have morphed into corporatized institutions. While not corporate universities in the strict sense of being adjunct to a corporation and run by shareholders, the administrative structure just described is that of a business corporation.

Like any business corporation, there are the questions of brand, competitiveness and quality assurance to attend to. If universities need to attract students, they need to sell themselves in a way they didn’t have to do before. One of the ways of doing so is by postulating *graduate attributes*, that is attributes that graduates will possess upon graduation that will appeal to potential employers; for example, creativity, problem solving ability, professional ethics, ability for lifelong learning, and so on. One university claimed that graduates ‘will be culturally sensitive and nonracist.’ How such a claim could be seriously made is beyond me. Does that mean that if a graduate were later to become involved in a race riot, he or she could sue the university for failing to deliver? This sort of claim is nonsensical because it is both unachievable and untestable. Such claims are on a par with detergent advertisements that claim to ‘wash whiter than white.’ And like detergent advertisements, there is a surprising similarity between one university’s set of graduate attributes and those of many other universities. The ‘brand name’ use of graduate attributes is just silly.

However, there are graduate attributes that can be helpful in programme and course design. A graduate attribute referring to creativity, say, provides a reminder that in appropriate courses in a programme, the intended outcomes should address creative

applications of the course content and should be taught and assessed accordingly. Graduate attributes make most sense as embedded in specific content, not as generic abilities that can be deployed across the board. Lifelong learning may sound like more bureaucratic jargon, but it should mean that graduates know how to continue updating their knowledge and skills after graduation, which is precisely what graduates need to continue to do throughout their professional careers. While that of course can't be directly assessed years down the track, the components of lifelong learning can indeed be fostered and assessed during the undergraduate years; components such as planning ahead, redefining complex and vague problems so that they become soluble, and most important, the ability to self-assess one's performance. All such skills are context and content bound and should be built into the teaching and assessment of the content subjects.

Graduate attributes are part of the whole system of *quality assurance*. The Australian Qualifications Framework was originally established in 1995. The latest version (2011)⁸⁶ sets out an extraordinarily complex 'taxonomy of learning outcomes' that attempts to define the criteria for learning outcomes for knowledge, skills and application of knowledge, for ten levels of postsecondary education: from certificates at level 1, through diploma, bachelors and masters, to doctoral level at level 10. The idea is to convey in generic terms what students are expected to be able to achieve at each level and to link up with international frameworks, such as the rather similar Bologna Process.⁸⁷ The next step is, as the jargon would have it, 'to assure stakeholders that these outcomes are being delivered.'

In 2008, the Labor Government established the Bradley Review of the higher education sector to determine, inter alia, if it 'was appropriately structured and financed to allow Australia to compete effectively in a globalised economy.' The Review led to 'a quality assurance and regulation framework that enhances overall quality in the sector and provides clear information and access to learning about what and where to study, and to provide industry and the community with assurances of graduate quality.'⁸⁸ Thus the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) was born, replacing the previous Australian Universities Quality Assurance Agency (AUQA). TEQSA requires

⁸⁶ <http://www.aqf.edu.au/>

⁸⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bologna_Process

⁸⁸ <http://www.teqsa.gov.au/>

documentary evidence that standards have been met, as outlined in three documents comprising over 70 daunting pages of management-speak. In sum, the organisation of modern universities reflects our modern business-oriented age and the quality assurance procedures seem well meaning and appropriate in that context.

In operation, however, it is a different story.

I shall illustrate with special reference to the workplace environment that academics experience. How some, perhaps many, academics perceive the new administrative structure is scarifyingly illustrated in two recent books by Richard Hil and Donald Meyers.⁸⁹

The academic experience

For all their faults, earlier universities were relatively stress-free for both staff and students (until politics in my case took over in one or two universities but I have been through all that). We academics in the middle to the last decade of the 20th century had an enviable lifestyle.

One attraction of academic life, for me at least, was portability. The university world, as the name implies, was truly global long before globalisation became tainted with the idea that first world countries capitalise on cheap labour in third world countries. Latin was originally the universal language of scholars; now it is English, thus enabling me to have been employed for significantly long periods in England, Canada, Australia and Hong Kong, and to have visited a dozen other countries on academic visits. That is a boon for which I am tremendously grateful. But not all academics see it that way. In all universities in which I have been employed, the great majority of staff have been nationals, most being local to the city in which the university was situated.

A major contributor to our peace of mind was tenure. The original idea of tenure was that an academic could feel free to tell the truths that research had uncovered, however inconvenient to governments or to powerful others that might be. Tenure also allowed academics to carry out long term research, the outcomes of which may take years to produce.

⁸⁹ Richard Hil, *Whackademia* (NewSouth Publishing, 2012) and Donald Meyers, *Australian Universities: A Portrait of Decline* (www.australianuniversities.id.au)

Today, most academics are not on tenure but on contract – and if they want their contracts renewed they had better be good little boys and girls in the eyes of administration. The corporate model, with its quality assurance procedures, requires academics to report to line managers who may not be academics themselves but who make academic decisions for academic staff – and if the latter disagree they may well receive career damaging reports.⁹⁰ Such procedures allow some senior administrators to bully and harass their staff. Indeed, one university, the University Newcastle, has a website devoted to examples of bullying put up by its victims.⁹¹

Academics are assessed on key performance indicators, such as loyalty to the institution (obey orders, in other words), continual updating online of their activities, and participation in meetings and committees. The managerial model of running universities has generated committee after committee on which academic staff must serve. Teaching loads can easily involve 15 class contact hours a week, not to mention the time outside the classroom spent in assessing student work, and increasingly, setting up compulsory blogs for student feedback and discussion that alone can involve three and more hours a day. Hil reports many cases of academics working flat out for 50 hours a week, some from 8 am to 8 pm, not carried away by doing their research as previously they might well have been, but by doing this kind of unfulfilling busywork. The continual assessment by line managers Hil claims is nothing short of demeaning and insulting. In no other profession are highly qualified experts treated as being so untrustworthy. An inevitable result of all this busywork, time pressure, disempowerment and insecurity is stress. Seventy five per cent of academics are suffering psychological stress, as opposed to 19 per cent in the general workforce, while job satisfaction amongst academics is much less than in the general workforce.⁹²

Quality assurance procedures are particularly time-consuming. TEQSA may be well meaning but it is often implemented unthinkingly. It requires mountains of input that keep teachers on line for hours, giving minutiae about the courses they teach. Unfortunately, quality assurance of this kind, being retrospective, is mostly a waste of time because the horse has already bolted. Quality *enhancement*, on the other hand, based on reflective practice and ongoing staff development, is entirely different as it involves

⁹⁰ Hil, op. cit., Chapter 6

⁹¹ <http://stop-b-uon.blogspot.com.au/>

⁹² Hil, op. cit., p. 92 ff.

formative monitoring of teaching and assessment for ways in which it can be improved. The focus here is on *teaching* not *teachers*, and such data are not and should not be used for personnel decisions. Quality enhancement subsumes quality assurance; if teaching is monitored and adjusted to make it better and better quality is automatically assured – and without all that tedious form filling.

So let us turn to teaching and learning.

Teaching and learning

Student fees are a major reason for the increasing concern for teaching quality since the mid-2000s. The more money students pay, the more they expect better teaching. Teaching today is in fact the name of the game and with students paying big money, they expect it to be good. Cramming students into large crowded lecture theatres is no longer good enough. The concern with improving teaching, using innovative methods such as outcomes-based teaching and learning, and constructive alignment as a design for teaching, is becoming widespread.

At this point it is important to clarify what we mean by ‘outcomes-based education’. A recurring term in the wording of graduate attributes, in the Australian Qualifications Framework and beloved in bureaucratic-speak generally is ‘outcomes’. This word provokes violent reactions from critics such as Hil and Meyers, who regard with reason that measuring ‘outcomes’ encapsulates all that is bad in managerialism. Without outcomes against which one can assess ‘quality’ and hold people in judgment, managerialism would not work.

But now let me use ‘outcomes’ in quite a different sense. To quote from Thomas Shuell again (see p. CCCC)⁹³:

If students are to learn desired outcomes in a reasonably effective manner, then the teacher’s fundamental task is to get students to engage in learning activities that are likely to result in their achieving those outcomes. . . . It is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does.

⁹³ Shuell, T. (1986). Cognitive conceptions of learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 56, 411- 36.

We teach content topics to student not just so they ‘understand’ a topic in some usually unspecified sense, but so that they can use that knowledge in order to solve problems, to be able to explain a topic or a theory either orally or in writing, to formulate a hypothesis, to design an experiment, to prescribe a medicine and so on. All these uses constitute various levels and ways of understanding the knowledge taught. These are the *outcomes* that we want students to achieve after learning the content taught. Those stated outcomes can be as high level and as abstract as we may deem appropriate – always leaving provision for desirable outcomes that we hadn’t thought of ourselves but our brighter students may well produce.

The second point that Shuell emphasises is that it’s *what the learner does* that determines what is learned. Knowledge is not transmitted or reduplicated from the teacher’s head to the students’. Rather, the teacher’s tasks are to encourage the learner to do what it takes to achieve those desired outcomes, and to assess the student’s performance to see how well those outcomes have been achieved. This is the essence of constructive alignment, an outcomes-based form of teaching and learning. And it works.⁹⁴

Yet Meyer devotes a whole chapter to ‘student-centred pandering’ and the potential for disaster that such pandering has: how can mere students learn by discovering for themselves? They need to be told what’s what by experts! Sorry, but that transmission metaphor for teaching is a nonsense. The issue here is about how students learn. Students learn through their own actions: listening, questioning, hypothesising, self-questioning. As Shuell makes clear we need to make a sharp distinction between what the teachers does and what the student does – and it’s the latter that ultimately determines what is learned. Lecturing by teachers is fine for achieving some outcomes but ineffectual with many students for other outcomes. We need to tune our teaching to what we want our students to learn.

Hil objects to setting intended learning outcomes or objectives, which to him mean the same thing, because teaching to predetermined learning outcomes he claims is ‘rigidification’ of teaching, ‘ensuring conformity to the prevailing order.’⁹⁵ As well it might in a rigid, bureaucratic institution, but that applies to any aspect of academic life in such institutions. Hil’s criticism is of the institutional climate, not the method of teaching.

⁹⁴ Biggs, J and Tang, C., *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, (McGraw-Hill Education, 4th edition 2011). See Chapter 13 especially.

⁹⁵ Hil, op. cit., p 116 ff

If the teacher designs the intended learning outcomes for a course, either alone or as a member of a course or programme committee, which in my experience is usually the case, the teachers decide the appropriate level of complexity or abstractness for the course outcomes. They also decide what assessment tasks to use to assess those outcomes, and such assessments should often include open-ended tasks, such as portfolios, to allow for outcomes that the student thinks are appropriate and that the teacher may not have thought of. This is the very opposite of ‘rigidification’.

Both Hil and Meyer are highly critical of ‘educationalists’ and the folly of educational research, action research particularly. They seem to think we already know all there is to know about teaching and assessing students. I find it extraordinary that scientists would ban research on any topic, let alone research on teaching, the very activity that is their professional responsibility to deliver most effectively. Action research is an ongoing tool for reflective practice that teachers should engage – if only they had the time, the skills and the open mindedness to have a go. There is also an institutional responsibility to value teaching, by supporting a teaching and learning, or staff development, centre and by operating according to a worked out philosophy of teaching and learning. Such an institution doesn’t need the retrospective and exhausting matter of quality *assurance* because they are already in the prospective business of quality *enhancement*. Quality enhancement ensures that what they are doing well now they will do better in future.

Outcomes-based education is used in both quality assurance and in quality enhancement but in very different ways. Quality assurance uses outcomes-based approaches to ensure that standards as present reached in degree programmes meet external criteria. If they do not, the best that can evidently be done is to blame those involved and order them to do better next time. Quality assurance operates top down from the ‘centre’ and is mostly concerned with benchmarking, with outcomes at programme and institutional levels.

Quality enhancement, on the other hand, is concerned with using outcomes-based teaching to enhance learning in the classroom by aligning teaching and assessment, in order to best facilitate achieving the intended learning outcomes. If the results are not as good as is intended, reflective practice or action research, call it what you will, is used to

pinpoint any problems and a worked out theory of teaching used to generate alternative strategies – a scientific approach indeed.

But the extent to which such innovative and best-practice teaching is employed in Australian universities is open to question. While I know some universities have excellent teaching and learning centres and are committed to enlightened teaching and inbuilt quality enhancement strategies, many others are not. How can they be with staff:student ratios of the order of 1:34 (the average in 1980 was 1:11), using casual staff who often do not have office space, who are paid on the basis of contact hours only, and required to teach where they might be needed rather than in their areas of expertise? Hil says that in some courses 80 per cent of teachers are these walk-in, walk-out ‘classroom attendants’. Under such cynical and morale destroying conditions, teaching cannot be good.

Thus, teaching in Australian universities today seems to be very mixed. While the rhetoric sounds good, the implementation of quality assurance as far as teaching is concerned is often over the top, the means having become the end. All that time and energy spent in bureaucratic form-filling would be much better spent on quality enhancement at the classroom level. But when teachers are already committed to 15 contact hours and a total commitment of 50 hours per week, only the most dedicated can devote the time needed for reflective, innovative teaching. It is instructive to learn that at least at school level the best results in terms of learning outcomes come from teachers who had fewest contact hours in the classroom. Teachers in Hong Kong, Korea and Shanghai teach half the number of hours that Australian teachers teach yet produced far better results. The reason is obvious: these teachers have more time to reflect on their teaching, to spend much more time in staff development, and to observe and discuss with their fellow teachers.⁹⁶

In Australian universities many probably most teachers are simply overworked and consequently can’t devote the time they should to improving their teaching.

Research

In universities twenty years ago, all the so-called perks of academe – long vacation, study leave, tenure, academic freedom itself – were based on the assumption that the university

⁹⁶ Jensen, B. *Catching Up: Learning from the best school systems in East Asia*. Melbourne: The Grattan Institute, February 2012.

was the place for untrammelled research and for publishing the results, the latter by writing books, journal articles and by teaching itself. Academics were there to seek out and publish 'the truth', as it arose from their research and that had been validated through the rules of scholarship: evidence and logical argument. You can't do that very effectively if the truth you find is an inconvenient one – and your job is on the line if you publish it. Mind, tenure didn't help poor old Sydney Orr, but his case was exceptional, so exceptional his sacking produced a ten year black ban on the Chair of Philosophy at Tasmania.

Research was also facilitated with a year's study leave every seven years. Study leave was not a year's worldwide holiday at the expense of the taxpayer, although many malicious critics painted it as that, but an opportunity to exchange and sharpen ideas with others in your field. Those were the days before Skype and electronic conferencing provided a more cost-effective substitute for much face-to-face contact. Study leave technically had to be earned, and was accountable, but frequently academics took leave on the flimsiest of grounds with nothing much to show for it; they got away with that because all too often accountability was slack. The long summer vacation should likewise have been the time for academics to bring themselves up to date with developments in their field, to catch up on their research and publishing, and to prepare for the next year's teaching. Again this was frequently abused. The Canadian notion of Summer Session (p. XXX) was an excellent way of using otherwise idle plant and otherwise idle academics.

When powerful corporations commission research, they do not do it to be altruistic; they want a particular result. Hence, academics hired to carry out contract research for large corporations are under pressure to produce the desired results if they want their funding to continue. The outcomes of that research are all too often 'commercial-in-confidence', which means that the patents are owned by the company and that academics may not publish that research. This privatises what would otherwise be public knowledge, whereas building upon public knowledge is what universities are theoretically there to do. The search for knowledge and knowledge itself should belong to all of us for the benefit of humankind, not for the benefit of someone in order to make money out of it. Knowledge, and the research that produces it, should be people-proof, it needs to be published so that is replicated, and either disconfirmed, or confirmed and

extended. If it is locked away we are all deprived. Yet universities have been known to discipline academics who offend powerful sources of funding.⁹⁷

‘Codes of conduct’ buried in procedural manuals prevent academics from making public comments unless they have been first ‘cleared’ by their dean or line manager. Obedience is hard to square with the academic tasks of conducting untrammelled research and of being social critic.

The way modern universities operate can therefore endanger academic freedom and freedom of speech in general. Yet Hong Kong is an interesting case. Although part of China, where censorship and punishment of dissenting academics is common, academic freedom in Hong Kong universities exists so far. To date, there has been little direct interference from Beijing. Indeed, when Permanent Secretary of Education and Manpower, Fanny Law, demanded that her critics be sacked from the Hong Kong Institute of Education, she was the one who lost her job over it, not her critics (p. MMM).

Generally, academics are expected to produce at least one publication a year – although very recently at the University of Sydney, when a financial crisis prompted the loss of 150 academic jobs, the bar was raised: less than *four* published papers in two years and your contract would not be renewed.⁹⁸ That is an extreme case, but similar pressures reward ‘quickies’, pot-boilers you can whack out in a hurry in whatever journal. This strongly discourages academics to engage in in depth research on complex topics that may take years to bring to fruition.

Where does the new order leave fundamental research, the sort of basic research that a healthy and ever-changing society requires, research that builds on our knowledge both of the physical world and of humankind, that may not have any immediate or even foreseeable pay-off and that consequently doesn’t attract corporate backers? Rich universities like Oxbridge in the UK and the Ivy League like Stanford and Princeton can still carry on with basic research, but in Australia, where few universities are independently wealthy, there are only the Australian Research Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council to provide independent grants. Such grants are fiercely competitive and subject to ministerial veto, as recently happened in the case of the ARC.

⁹⁷ For an example of how this may occur see: <http://www.bmartin.cc/dissent/documents/sau/sau10.html>

⁹⁸ <http://newmatilda.com/2011/12/05/sydney-university-academics-speak-out>

Given the need of a healthy society for untrammelled teaching and research, I foresee a return to some sort of a binary system. The majority of institutions would be teaching institutions for professionally oriented courses, with a few institutions funded for basic research and teaching the major disciplines, with the necessary support structures of tenure, higher levels of academic freedom, study leave and low student-staff ratios. This is happening unofficially in the older 'sandstone' universities but it needs thinking through, with cost and other implications in mind.

The student experience

When I was an undergraduate my fees were not only paid for by the Commonwealth on a relatively easy-to-get scholarship but I also had a small living allowance, means-tested against my father's income. I had time to join clubs and societies, even to teach in a school full time for the whole of a term in each of my third and honours years. I was very much involved in the politics of the Orr Case. The amenities of the students' union, and clubs and societies, greatly enriched my university experience.

Two main factors today impoverish that experience. Debt is the major one. With students paying fees of thousands of dollars a year, how much depending on the faculty, they either have to have rich parents, run up a crippling HECS debt that will hang over them for many years after graduation, or work their butts off while at university on part-time or even full-time jobs. They don't have time for all those rich experiences to be had in clubs and societies and in student politics. Even if they did find time, it's too late because Prime Minister Howard abolished compulsory student union fees – they frequently leaned to the left, you see – and with that were abolished the means by which clubs and societies (and cheap catering, child-minding and even health services) were underwritten. The current Labor government proposes to repeal Howard's bill sometime in 2012, but there appear to be no moves in that direction as yet.

A more positive side to the student experience is multiculturalism. Menzies encouraged the Colombo Plan by which students from Asian countries came here but they were always expected to return to their own countries immediately on graduation. Apart from giving a concert during orientation week, which most students, local and international, attended and dutifully ate noodles and curry in the interval, the overseas students kept to themselves, as did the local students. Today, the student population in Australian

universities, like the country itself, is much more ethnically diverse, with more intermingling between Australian and international students than even a few years ago. Local and international students walking hand in hand is quite a common and particularly pleasing sight today, but I rather doubt such a sight would have pleased Prime Minister Menzies.

Foreign influence

Which brings me to the question of foreign influences on universities. Fifty years ago, it was a positive advantage if an applicant for an academic post was British, or was applying from Britain as I had. The University of New England even insisted that I travel first-class from Britain, even when I had requested not to. That same university also played at being awfully British with its gowns and its college system with high table and moral tutors. James Auchmuty, founding vice-chancellor of Newcastle University, explicitly proposed to establish 'a university in the British tradition' – but the way Newcastle University turned out post-Auchmuty was hopefully not in that tradition. On the other hand, Louis Matheson, founding vice-chancellor of Monash and English himself, strove to establish academic excellence without banging on about the traditions of another country.

Today, our image of a typical Australian university, our few older sandstone universities aside, is essentially that of a teaching institution that prepares students for professions that are in high demand in the market place, with a research agenda that is financed commercially wherever possible. Such a university is much like other universities world-wide, if with an unashamed Australian accent.

Canada had a similar problem with the United States as we had with Britain. When I was in Canada, Canadian academics railed against the American influence in Canadian universities and particularly against a perceived preference for appointing American professors over Canadians. As did British academics in Australia in earlier times, Americans tended to obtain senior posts in Canadian universities and colonise departments with their friends and compatriots.⁹⁹

The University of Hong Kong was from the first a British colonial outpost and ran accordingly. British academics and administrators were appointed to key posts, with better conditions of employment, housing and repatriation than local academics were offered

⁹⁹ Mathews, R & Steele, J. *The struggle for Canadian universities*. New York: The New Press, 1969

until the last 20 years or so. All teaching and examining was done in English – which is why in 1949 Chinese speaking colleges began to be founded that later formed the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Now that Hong Kong is no longer a British but a Chinese colonial outpost, there are signs, naturally enough, that Chinese are being appointed over other nationalities. As against that, the talent pool in a country of over 1.3 billion is huge, so this does not necessarily mean lower standards for there must be vast numbers of extremely bright and appointable academics from China.

Universities wherever they are should employ the best people possible, regardless of nationality, and they should not imitate the non-academic and nationalistic features of universities in other countries.

Universities then, as they are now, and as they might be

Underlying my depiction of universities as they once were and as they now are is the inescapable fact that universities of any era and in any location are components of the ecosystem or society in which they find themselves. They fulfil the functions that their society expects of them. Like it or not, neoliberalism is espoused by major political parties all over the Western world; taxes are minimized, public expenditure is minimized, services are handed over to the private sector – and let market forces prevail. This applies to universities, as it does to banking, merchandising and mining.

In that light, universities aren't doing a bad job: public expenditure on universities has fallen from nearly total to under half, while participation rates are high and rising. The public cost per student is a fraction of what it was, yet standards in the workplace of such professions as paramedical, hospitality and the arts, for example, are rising (or should be) as entrants to those professions now have university degrees whereas previously they did not – but I have to add that many would regard this development as regressive in some professions such as nursing. The quality of teaching and learning, so bad ten or so years ago, is now recognised as a priority and is improving, but in some universities much more than in others. Maybe those ubiquitous market forces will sort that one out in due course. In short, universities are part of our society and seem to be doing a reasonable job in preparing peoples for that society.

However, neoliberal economics, which sees everything as driven by the marketplace for corporate profit, is not what I amongst many others would see that society

is all about or should be about. Fruitful and humane societies cannot live by the dollar alone. A society should also be about such other things as social obligation and environmental sustainability. Just as Keynesian economics was a passing phase with its very different implications for society and for the place of universities in society so neoliberalism is a passing phase. For it is certain that the economic and industrial basis for society has to change. A society that bases its existence on annual and increasing economic growth, using non-renewable resources, is inevitably facing extinction: the law of the conservation of matter makes that obvious.

We urgently need a kind of institution that can undertake the sort of basic research that a healthy, sustainable and ever-changing society needs to carry out: an institution that takes on the charge of building on our knowledge both of the physical world and of humankind, that may have no immediate or even foreseeable pay-off, and that makes such knowledge publicly available and not hidden as commercial-in-confidence. This sort of institution would likewise be a component in the eco-system of society but it would be a different society, one that values quality of life, social justice and environmental sustainability.

John Ralston Saul makes the point that currently western governments are in management mode, which is inimical to true democracy.¹⁰⁰ Democracy is based on thoughtful debate and openness to change whereas in the present climate change is vehemently resisted even when – especially when – we are facing economic catastrophe. He gave this striking example. Neoliberal economics led to the banks grossly over-lending on unsecured mortgages. Those responsible for this reckless decision-making weren't punished, rather they were charged with fixing the very problem that they themselves had created. Instead of governments then taking the pressure off the people whose mortgages were now unmanageable, they instead poured hundreds of billions of dollars of public money, taxpayers' money, into propping up the failed private banks. It would have been far cheaper, and better for the banks themselves, Ralston Saul argued, if the government had taken over those mortgages. People would then have money to keep the economy going and the banks would have remained sustainable. But instead of questioning the economic theory that had led to the global financial crisis, the 'solution' to the problem

¹⁰⁰ John Ralston Saul, 'The reinvention of the world - It's broke: How can we fix it?' The University of Tasmania, 27th August, 2012

was more of the same – to everyone’s detriment except the extremely wealthy few whose greed and locked-in thinking had created the problem.

Resistance to accepting the science on climate change and to what might be done to mitigate it is another example. Those with a vested interest in maintaining our dependence on fossil fuels that the best science tells us is causing global warming is to confuse the issue. Rustle up a few rogue scientists, many of whom have links with the fossil fuel and mining industries, and demand equal time in the best post-modern manner – and to whom the press frequently give much more than equal time – and call carbon pricing ‘a great big toxic tax’, to quote one prominent politician. The public become confused and what three years ago they saw as a top priority, is now just another tax and to be avoided. And so we continue with the status quo, its dangers to our very planet swept under the corporate carpet.

The solution is education, it has to be. The sort of education that Ralston Saul says makes people think, not the sort that trains them for jobs and the sort of skills that serve the status quo. Current educational institutions are founded on, and operate by, the very neoliberal economy that needs replacing. We need to rethink where we are with respect to higher education. The new model for universities would be more than just the traditional model of free and open research and teaching. The new university would also need to be an agent for changing society by educating students so that they can think at a meta-theoretical level, enabling them to challenge the linear paradigms that lock us into unsustainable policies. That is not what existing universities are doing while they are in managerial mode, where the order of the day is to put in place on-line strategies for cost-effectively achieving managerially imposed institutional outcomes. No radical ideas, please.

Ralston Saul sees a properly functioning university system as basic to our survival, a university system that helps people to think outside the square, that challenges the self-serving dogmas created by the corporate world, not one that tunes the graduate attributes it hopes to foster to the demands of the corporate world. The higher education sector is where new paradigms for society should be being developed – which is unlikely in present institutional climates that are part of the eco-system of a neoliberal society.

I am not recommending a return to the pre-Dawkins tertiary sector: indeed, the contents of this book would discourage that suggestion. Students emerging from our

traditional universities have their paradigm-busting potential nested in the highly specialised areas in which they did their PhDs. This is of course highly desirable in itself but we need to go further than that, to question the paradigms that run society itself: to operate at an extended abstract level across a broad front, to put it in SOLO terms. This is close to what Vice-Chancellor Steven Schwartz simply calls ‘wisdom’.¹⁰¹ Schwartz proposes that final year students do a capstone course, called ‘Practical Wisdom’, in which they are required to reflect in the broadest terms on what they have acquired over the whole of their university studies that hopefully would lead to a lifelong pursuit for the getting of wisdom. One final year project is obviously not enough, although it is undoubtedly a good start. This sort of broad, extended abstract thinking needs to be fostered in quite a different climate from the utilitarian, job focused, cost-effective university that is so common today. However, such an open-ended education is clearly not for everybody. Indeed many would see it as a waste of time and resources. But such an education is sorely needed to offset the closed-loop thinking that is a function of our monetarist society.

Universities were previously acknowledged as the home of the academic as social critic, but that role has recently and deliberately been trivialised as an ineffectual pastime for effete latté sipping elites. Such mockery arises out of the linear locked-in thinking that the powerful need if they are to preserve the status quo for their own ends. Current universities are primarily designed to serve the job market that currently exists, and given that people need to be prepared for jobs, that is inevitable and desirable. But that is not about the getting of wisdom, which is what at least some institutes of higher education should be about.

The needs, financing, administration and governance of institutions designed to teach professional and vocational courses to around half those leaving school are one thing. The needs, financing, administration and governance of institutions in which research and teaching in the basic disciplines, and in which the role of academic as social critic is deliberately fostered rather than suppressed, are very much another.

Ralston Saul asserts that progress is about finding faults with the present system. For society to improve, we have to admit that we have problems; if we cannot admit this

¹⁰¹ Schwartz, S. ‘Restoring wisdom to universities.’ 2010 Annual Lecture, Macquarie University. <http://www.vc.mq.edu.au/speeches.php>

then change and progress become impossible. We need to point out what those problems are, and to suggest ways forward, which is exactly what the role of the academic as social critic would do. It is a role that has a long history, back to Socrates' Athens, but it is one that we have lost in higher education as it mostly is today.

The major flaw in today's universities is that we are trying to do the academic task with a monetarist set of values. That is not good alignment. Give half or more of school leavers postsecondary education by all means, and given the scale of that task, public funding in full is impractical. But that is not giving us the kind of institution that will instill the wisdom needed for a healthy, progressive and changing society.

How universities are to get from where they are at present to where they should be in order to serve a sustainable and just society is the massive educational challenge that we face. Traditional universities in their inefficient and bumbling way had something like that noble end in sight but they lost their direction sufficiently to be attacked and taken over by the neoliberal right. Now, most universities are simply vocational colleges that serve society-as-it-is, under fairly tight managerial constraints. Desirable and even essential as that last task is, it is not what universities are for, are uniquely capable of doing, and must do for the sake of producing a just and sustainable world.

I hope that sharing my academic journey has not only been interesting and enjoyable – it has been for me – but that it may be instrumental in however small a way in helping us to reflect on the role of higher education in our complex and I think dangerously poised society.

And that is where I have to leave it.