

COMMUNICATING CHANGE IN THE AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: BILL'S STORY

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1. INTRODUCTION

The relevance of management research, despite its acknowledged importance, is regularly criticised as failing to impact on real life because of inaccessibility in terms of language, academic conventions and location in scholarly journals. For critical management scholars, especially those of a Habermasian bent, accessibility of research to the researched is a crucial step in engaging in 'ideal speech' and emancipation. Despite this, critical management scholars are prevented by the same obstacles as their less critical colleagues from reaching the 'subjects' of their research.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the results of a longitudinal study of organisational change in a graduate business school (Ryan, 2009). The results are presented as a story about the hypothetical academic, Associate Professor Bill. Readers are invited to test the veracity of the story and consider the questions it raises about themselves, the role of the researcher and reasons for institutional change. The paper contributes in two ways. First, in the presentation of the research results, providing an innovative and intimate insight into the lifeworld of an academic in a period of significant institutional change. Second, in the novel way in which the research is presented, inviting the reader to identify personally or otherwise with the research and interpret its meaning.

The paper is structured so that it begins with Section 2, the method behind the research before presenting the research results in the form of a story. In Section 3 the story is followed by its interpretation through a broad lens of critical theory. Habermas' (1984, 1987) construction of social change as adapted to organisations by Laughlin (1991; 1995) is used to explain the external and internal changes in Bill's lifeworld over five years (see Ryan and Guthrie, 2009 for a fuller explanation of this framework). Section 4 is an analysis of the author's attempt to meet Barone and Eisner's (2006) criteria for successful storytelling in constructing the story; it concludes in section 5 by inviting the reader to make the final evaluation.

2. METHOD AND CONTEXT BEHIND THE STORY

2.1 Method

The story is based on the results of a longitudinal research into the tensions between academic values and the corporatisation of higher education using Australian graduate schools of business (GSB) as a case study. The data are from interviews with academics from three autonomous GSB in 2002 and 2008. Participants are viewed as the one sample from one hypothetical GSB referred to as 'the School' or the 'AGSB'. In 2002, 21 academics were interviewed representing 25% of

the full-time academic population of the three schools. Of the original 21 academics, 18 were interviewed again in 2008. Only five remained in the same school in 2008 although all were teaching in business schools, including three who had resigned or retired from academe.

Participants were selected to reflect the disciplines, age, academic ranking and gender composition of the School population (for further details of the method for this research, see Ryan et al. (2008)). Our hypothetical academic, Associate Professor Bill, represents the experience of the 'average academic' from among those interviewed about their lives in 2002 and 2008. Given the strong similarity among participant responses, especially in 2002 when all were working in the AGSB, it was not difficult to develop an 'average' profile. Although the majority had changed positions and institutions by 2008, their reflections on change and comparisons with their earlier experiences at the AGSB were not so different from each other. Bill is given male gender only because two thirds of the participants were male.

The use of 'storytelling' as a means of transmitting research results has long been recognised as a viable research and teaching tool. Stories in the form of fiction or nonfiction literature have been found to be useful. For instance, Jermier and Domalgalski (2000, p. 62) note that "Literature can convey insights ... in a way that is ... vivid and memorable, [and] expands understanding of deeper and subtler realms ...". Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux (1994) advocate the use of fictional literature in management education, recognising that it imparts a phenomenological type of knowledge providing a unique insight. Hansen and Kahnweiler (1993, p. 1393) argue that stories are "easy to follow, generally entertaining, and are more likely to be remembered". Pfeffer and Sutton (2006, p. 67) assert "when used correctly, stories and cases are powerful tools for building management knowledge". Kouzes and Posner (2002) found that stories fostered interest and engaged the attention of the listeners.

2.2 Context

University education has become big business over the past decade with nearly a doubling of students being involved in higher education globally. Also, during that period there has been a significant increase in the movement of students across national boundaries. In 2013, Australian business schools/faculties teach the majority of university students (about 40% of all local and international). Australia provides a key illustration of the marketisation and globalisation of the higher education system (see Scott, 1998; Parker, 2011; 2012; 2013), and in particular of management education. The result, in the AHES, is commercialised higher education with academics becoming commoditised inputs into the process (Guthrie et al., 1995; Parker, 2012). Management education now is a marketable product and the AHES is in the business of providing mass delivered and homogeneous education. As organisations, universities are major drivers of national and local economies, and this is evident in the language spoken by vice chancellors and senior management groups. We see it in everyday conversations by representatives and administrators of governments, and we hear it discussed by commentators in the media.

In Australia, as in many countries, much higher education is funded by government. For at least 30 years, governments around the world have been trying to reduce financial outlays, more recently, attempting to balance budgets after the Global Financial Crisis. Commercialisation, privatisation and corporatisation of the public sector have been central to government policy in

many countries, regardless of their governments' political persuasion, and have led to the outsourcing of public services previously delivered directly by government, particularly in education, health and welfare (Broadbent and Guthrie, 2008). The Australian higher education system has been under these pressures over the past three decades, with enrolment of full-fee paying overseas students encouraged. There are many management academics voices and now a considerable body of literature that engages with the state of our academic field and that identifies several worrying tendencies.

Amongst the challenges identified is the globalisation and commercialisation of higher education. The globalisation of the world of business has been accelerating since well before the turn of this century. Consistent with its growth in the services sector, has been the globalisation of education, particularly in the tertiary education sector (Parker, 2012, 2013). Many of the universities in this sector have moved beyond their traditional national focus to become players in a globally competitive higher education market. They range from public sector funded universities now increasingly generating their own market derived revenues, to corporately owned private universities run as for-profit entities (Evans et al., 2010; Ryan, 2010).

3. THE STORY OF ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR BILL

The story opens with Associate Professor Bill living a busy but contented life within a strong collegial graduate school, the success of which is a direct result of earlier changes to the Australian higher education system (AHES). Over a period of six years, Bill becomes increasingly unhappy and detached as his institution's managerialism seriously affects his everyday life and identity. The story is set against changes in the AHES as discussed above, changes that came in four waves: massification, marketisation, corporatisation (including entrepreneurialism) and managerialism (Ryan et al., 2008). While marketisation and corporatisation allowed Bill to live an exciting academic life, the fourth wave of change, managerialism, signalled the end to the excitement and presented a challenge to his academic values and identity. Ultimately the story and its interpretation pose the question as to whether Bill's values and identity were colonised or evolved by the changes in academic work.

3.1 Five Years in the Life of Bill – an average academic in an Australian graduate school of business

I first met Bill in 2002 in his office at the Australian Graduate School of Business (AGSB). The School buildings and surroundings were quite palatial compared to other parts of the University but Bill's office reflected that of a typical academic with books and papers strewn everywhere. He was 45 at the time and had worked at the AGBS for seven years as a Senior Lecturer. Before this, Bill had worked in three other business schools totalling 16 years as an academic. Before becoming an academic he had worked in private industry where he studied for his MBA part-time. His study became more exciting than his work so that, on completing his MBA, he enrolled in a PhD and began part-time teaching. This was the turning point for Bill. He so enjoyed teaching and what he saw to be the life of his full-time colleagues that when the opportunity arose, he surrendered his job in industry to become an academic. Although the move to academe involved a substantial reduction in salary, Bill considered the freedom of being in control of his own work and time with thought-provoking colleagues was sufficient compensation. He had resented the control and command culture of working in a large private sector organisation.

After 16 year as an academic, Bill remained satisfied with his work, especially the freedom over what he teaches and researches and the time in which he does it. Additionally, he enjoyed the School environment, describing it as hard working, friendly and collegial, collegial in terms of respect for colleagues rather than governance. His colleagues were highly motivated and his classes stimulating. One small disappointment for Bill was that, although the School and its flagship program, the MBA, was multidisciplinary, the achievement of true interdisciplinarity was unnecessarily restricted by a disciplinary focus from research and publication requirements. Students were a special pleasure to Bill because of their maturity and motivation, he viewed them as an important source of his own learning. However, the fact that they paid high fees sometimes encouraged them to behave like customers, not a behaviour with which Bill felt personally comfortable. Despite equally valuing research and teaching, Bill admitted that teaching takes precedence because of the urgency of deadlines and the expectations of the students. Being a good teacher is important to both Bill and the AGSB.

Bill's first loyalty is to the School and his colleagues. His is ambiguous in his feelings about the Dean and critical of the University administration. Several deans have passed through the School since Bill joined. According to Bill, deans come and go, but the culture and collegiality of AGSB academics are stronger than a single dean. A good dean is a valuable asset to the School but a bad dean causes unnecessary distractions and politics. The autonomous governance of the AGSB was important to Bill, regardless of the Dean's disposition. University administrators threatened the School's autonomy because they were not comfortable with its difference and wanted a greater percentage of revenue from the AGSB. Over the years Bill had noticed that the number of administrators had increased while support to academics had decreased, leading to greater pressure in every aspect of work. Inappropriate bureaucratic administrative processes were a particular source of frustration emanating from the University administration but not the School's administrative staff whom Bill considered part of the School 'team'. Bill admitted that neither he nor his colleagues took University processes very seriously, complying with them in terms of the letter rather than the spirit of the law.

It had taken a while for me to make an appointment with Bill because his schedule included a teaching trip to Hong Kong for ten days followed by teaching an intensive development course for executives at a retreat outside the city. Most of his teaching was carried out in intensive blocks in the evenings and at weekends. When I asked Bill about his lifestyle and when he found time for research and family, Bill admitted it was sometimes quite stressful, but he was well compensated for the additional work. Teaching overseas and in intensive blocks provided good opportunities to write up his research while executive education and consulting kept him up-to-date with the latest issues and practice, which in turn informed his teaching. Overseas teaching was also a time to socialise with colleagues teaching at the same time. Although he enjoyed the experience of being in Asia for his own education, the students were weaker than the local students and it did take its toll on health and family life. The initial attraction of travel and additional remuneration wore off after a few visits. Overall, Bill much preferred the lifestyle of an AGSB academic to being in a large undergraduate business school where he thought the culture was weaker and more negative, the resources fewer and with less remuneration or opportunities for additional earnings. On the issue of earnings, Bill was adamant that any

additional remuneration was only commensurate with his additional effort compared to non-AGSB academics.

After over two hours of talking with Bill, I asked my last question, what his ideal life would involve. He thought for a while before answering and then responded saying he was really quite content with his work and life at the AGSB but at the edges it could be improved if there were more time for research and less managerialism and administrative interference. As I left the AGSB, I reflected on how different Bill's story was from the results of large aggregate surveys of Australian academic life at the time. While Bill appeared to be enjoying his academic life, his colleagues elsewhere were indicating their greatest job dissatisfaction since such surveys began. Over a decade of government policies aimed at deregulating higher education had created stress and frustration among most academics. However, Bill and his colleagues appeared to have benefited from the same policies that allowed fee-paying international and postgraduate students into the system. As a result, the AGSB was better resourced than other academic units and Bill enjoyed the entrepreneurial spirit within the School.

I met Bill several times at conferences over the next few years where we spoke briefly, exchanging news and a few pleasantries. In 2008, it was time to formally meet again to follow-up on the first interview. I sent Bill a copy of his 2002 transcript with a request that we meet to discuss what had changed in the intervening period. This time it was much easier to find a time to meet. Bill had reduced his additional teaching and ceased to consult or teach on executive programs. He was now an Associate Professor. His office was much the same, however, his tone was different and it became evident that this was not because of the promotion. Bill was now over 50 and concerned with how he would spend his final decade or so of work. What had happened both to Bill and the AGSB over the past years had given him cause to look elsewhere for work. He now spent several hours a week looking for, or thinking about, other jobs, stirred by his disillusionment and discomfort with the direction and values of those controlling the AGSB.

Among the several reasons Bill gives for his current attitude, are the following. He complains that work pressure has increased, especially pressure to publish and apply for grants, but the satisfaction from work has decreased. Most of his colleagues have left and the School culture has changed from one of stimulation to one of control. Among those colleagues who remain, including Bill himself, most of their time is spent working from home to avoid what they perceive as a negative environment. The battle to retain AGSB autonomy was lost and the School will soon be merged into the large undergraduate Faculty based on the argument that a greater critical mass of discipline-based researchers will be needed to meet national research assessment requirements. The once intermittent annoying administrative intrusions on his work have become relentless. There is no choice but to take them seriously as policies and processes have come to represent what is most important to the University. In order to increase fee revenue, student eligibility requirements have been lowered and Bill no longer enjoys teaching as he did before. He complains that the younger full-time students are less motivated with poorer language skills, are more demanding and less intellectually challenging. The classroom is the not the 'bear pit of ideas' that it once was. Unlike before, Bill now looks forward to teaching offshore not only because it allows him a break from the stress of work, but he now finds the students relatively better than those onshore.

Bill still remains in contact with his colleagues who left the AGSB. While most left to find employment in other business schools, some retired or left academic life to become consultants. Regardless of what they have done, they tell Bill that their lives are less pressured but not quite as satisfying nor exciting as in the heyday of the AGSB. Those colleagues who left academic employment continue to teach casually because they enjoy it but do not regret having left. A few of Bill's colleagues accepted managerial positions within universities. They have gained a broader view of the university system and, as a result, strive to protect their academics from bureaucratic excesses. The one or two who have embraced the management system look back and see flaws in their former AGSB life and colleagues, especially their own and their former colleagues lack of empathy for senior executives.

On the subject of academic managers, Bill no longer believes that the AGSB culture is stronger than the deans that pass through it. In recent years there has been a high turnover of deans, some on the side of the University and trying to bring the AGSB under control while others fought against University control. Either way, the University management won out, with or without the help of the deans. The AGSB culture was forced to change as so many of its academics abandoned ship, including the deans who had fought to maintain its autonomy. Collegiality and entrepreneurialism no longer come to mind when Bill describes the new culture. He now uses words like alienated, disengaged and transactional. His new colleagues have not experienced the possibilities of the past and, much to Bill's frustration, appear to accept things as they are. Although still valuing the freedom over what and how he teaches and researches and uses his time, Bill has lost his feeling of ownership and belonging toward the AGSB, withdrawing into his own work and world. The obsession with making money and measuring publications has undermined his understanding of 'quality' in teaching and research and intensified his cynicism of official versions of 'quality'.

Bill's lifestyle continues to be that of an itinerant, working non-traditional hours, in multiple locations but he is tiring of it, feeling there is no longer sufficient reward, intrinsic or extrinsic, for working to such a schedule. The departure of colleagues, along with changes to governance structures, altered the School culture to the point where Bill feels like a factory employee rather than an academic colleague. The passion for his School has turned to indifference. Despite his continual search for a new position outside the AGSB, Bill is held back from ever following through with an application. In the back of his mind ring the comment of colleagues who left for other universities that it's not very different elsewhere, it's just that the pain of change came earlier in other places so it is easier to get on with life. This reminds me that 'getting on with life' also seems to be the message from the latest aggregate survey of academics in Australia. Although distrust of university management remains high throughout the sector, the survey reports improved job satisfaction and institutional commitment.

I wish Bill luck with whatever he decides to do and leave his office puzzled about what has really happened to him. Obviously his world had changed and it is not a change that sits comfortably with him. But is he just grieving over a glorified past or fighting passively to save what he believes is important? Would acceptance of the new order involve a change in his fundamental values or simply a reorientation of his behaviour to adjust to what others have deemed a

necessary change in the system? Is his obvious regret about the change a symptom of resistance to the change or resignation?

4. CRITICAL MANAGEMENT RESEARCH AND THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING

In the *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), Habermas combines *systems theory* with *theories of social action* to give insight into both the nature of social systems and the experience of the individual or lifeworld (Kemmis, 1998). Habermas conceives society as constituted by three 'lifeworlds' – the objective (based on instrumental reason), social (based on practical reason) and personal (based on affective reason). With increasing complexity in society, over time the objective lifeworld differentiates itself from the other lifeworlds and is expressed in 'systems' such as the economy. These systems are guided and given meaning by the social lifeworld until they become so complex that 'steering media' are required to guide the systems to align with the lifeworlds (Laughlin, 1987). Increasing differentiation between lifeworld and system is made possible as language develops to articulate the differences, however, because systems are based on instrumental reason, the language decentration that facilitates differentiation, eventually allowing the system to dominate the lifeworld (Laughlin, 1987; Power and Laughlin, 1992). Possibilities for communication between system and lifeworld decline as the steering media take on a life of their own and employ the mechanisms of 'bureaucratism' and 'monetisation' to steer and thus 'colonise' the lifeworld (Burrell, 1994). In response to colonisation, the lifeworld may either defend itself reactively or proactively re-establish its superiority. The latter action is the goal of Habermas' critical theory, whereby through communicative action and ideal speech situations, the distinct natures of the system and lifeworld can be understood and rebalanced (Laughlin, 1987).

A framework to understand and research lifeworlds is provided by Mingers (1997a) who suggests that Habermas' three lifeworlds be broken into four steps within a research process. Each of the four steps, *appreciation; analysis; assessment* and *action* are applied to each lifeworld to enable the researcher to link lifeworlds with research methods. While the first three steps are reasonably easily aligned with the common research processes of data collection, analysis and evaluation, the fourth step, *action*, requires the researcher to return to the field to generate discussion and consensus among participants. For researchers, the fourth step is always the most difficult for a range of reasons including elapsed time, pressures to publish, and to do so within conventions and locations not easily accessible to those outside the academic field of study. For the purposes of this paper, we will confine our discussion to the limitations posed by academic 'objectivity' and language.

Form and language in the presentation of research results affects the degree to which participants can identify with the research and with their own voices. Commonly, qualitative research results are interpreted and presented through selections of examples and participant quotations to illustrate themes from the research (Strauss, 1987). This often stifles the voice of the participants by locating their quotations within arguments as well as ignoring the role and voice of the researcher. An alternative presentation is to convert the results into stories where questions of voice and reflexivity become important. Through voice both researcher and research participants can be heard within the text. Traditionally this is achieved through the use of first person and quotations, but "textual experimentation ...can help the researcher to overcome the tendency to

write in the distanced and abstracted voice of the disembodied ‘I’” (Guba and Lincoln, 2005, p. 314). Although such experiments result in ‘messy texts’, they also “seek to break the binary between science and literature ... and communication social worlds that have remained private and ‘nonscientific’” Guba and Lincoln, 2005, p. 315). Questions of voice are closely linked to questions of reflexivity, the process of critical self-examination by the researcher, “the conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent” (Guba and Lincoln, 2005, p. 314). Textual experimentation, including storytelling, must be “embedded in the practices of narrativity and reflexivity, without which achieving a voice of (partial) truth is impossible” (Guba and Lincoln, 2005, p. 314).

Storytelling as form of narrative analysis in reporting qualitative data has been adopted from sociology and used by education researchers (for example, Polkinghorne, 1995; Barone 2001) as a way to “enhance meanings [and] to broaden and deepen ongoing conversations about education policy and practice” (Barone and Eisner 2006, p. 102). The success of reporting in this way relies on four consequences arising from the storytelling: illuminating effect; generativity; incisiveness; and generalisability (Barone and Eisner, 2006). *Illuminating effect* refers to the story’s ability to reveal what has previously been unnoticed by making “vivid the subtle but significant” so awareness of what the research is addressing is increased (Barone and Eisner, 2006, p. 102). *Generativity* refers to the story’s ability to stimulate new questions. *Incisiveness* refers to the story’s ability to go to the heart of the matter and focus the reader’s attention on salient issues. And lastly, *generalisability* refers to the story’s ability to allow the reader to make connections not previously made by allowing readers to identify with the story and its context. These four criteria fit well within Habermas’ notion of communicative action for emancipation which is essentially Mingers’ (1997b) fourth step of *action* in the research process.

Emancipation is essentially a form of learning whereby participants may judge whether or not change in social and personal lifeworlds is the result of colonisation by external systems or a form of necessary evolution (for further explanation, see Ryan and Guthrie, 2009). The link between organisation learning and storytelling is well explored within the literature (McAulay and Sims, 2009). Storytelling permits individuals to explore values and beliefs through stories about their own dilemmas and experiences which in turn benefits individual and group learning (Abma, 2003). For example, significant organisational change creates social drama and “a period of emotional and interpretative conflict [that is resolved by stakeholders] sharing stories about unfolding events and more implicitly by identifying the plot” (Downing 1997, p. 27). Indeed the story presented in this paper, involves the impacts of system and organisation change on personal and social values.

5. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSES

As long time management academics, this story is one that is close to our hearts and own experiences. Although based on data from interviews and monitoring of changes in the higher education system, we take full responsibility for the form, plot and language of the story. Studying our own colleagues overcame difficulties associated with being perceived as a ‘voyeur’ or ‘informant’ or of having only a ‘partial picture’ of the subject because the researcher is of a different background (Lapsely, 2004). On the other hand, being an ‘insider’ can lead to its own biases and assumptions that require engagement in ‘self critical reflexivity’ (McSweeney, 2004). Compared to our initial data analysis through coding, theme development and identification of

relevant quotations, writing the story helped us to be more self reflexive. Additionally, by using Barone and Eisner's (2006) criteria for guiding and evaluating storytelling, we were forced to consider issues of subjectivity and accessibility. Specifically, we tried to meet each of the four criterion in the following ways.

First, in terms of *illuminating effect* or the story's ability to reveal what has previously been unnoticed, we chose to focus on the one character, Bill, rather than include other characters, such as his colleagues, the deans, university managements or public servants and politicians. While this makes the story one-sided by denying the voices of other actors, it forces the reader to concentrate on system impacts on the individual without distraction. Such individual focus is required for an understanding of values and beliefs or lifeworld and lifeworld change. For example, we see in the story that Bill's valuing of freedom remained constant over the period. Second, in order to stimulate new questions, *generativity* of the story, we included two voices, those of Bill and us, the researchers. We used our voices to raise important questions at the end of the story; stories that we considered most important to our concerns about colonisation or evolution. However, in writing up the story, other questions arose, such as the experiences for new colleagues and for the deans, as well as Bill's lack of resistance to change other than exit and withdrawal. Ultimately, these and, hopefully other new questions will be for the reader to ask.

In order to address the third criteria, to get to the heart of the matter and focus on the important issues, *incisiveness*, we wrote the story so that external changes in system and university were told through Bill's experiences and the impacts of change, with one exception, explained through his emotive reactions to them, not his evaluations. For example, the research priority, the new students and greater administrative control are evidence of system change, while the loss of ownership, feelings of alienation and frustration are the personal reactions. The distinction between emotion and evaluation is important as it is the former that provides greater insight into personal lifeworld. The exception mentioned earlier, was our role in the story in editorialising on sector wide surveys. This was done to provide background information and comparison that would raise questions about why the difference. In a more subtle way, it was also a means of demonstrating the difference between methods of aggregate survey and individual interviews.

And finally, in terms of *generalisability* or the story's ability to allow the reader to identify with the story and its context, this must be left for the reader to judge. "Critical research tries to engage in the power dynamics of truth in organisations without setting itself up as the final arbitrator of truth claims" (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 47). We therefore invite the reader to judge the degree to which she or he identifies with the story and to answer the question of whether Bill was colonised or revolutionised or able to resist colonisation.

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