

# It's all about building a narrative

**Arthur O'Neill**

School of Hard Knocks, University of Life

The  
Universe  
Looks  
Down

*(Title on poster advertising an exhibition of works on paper by Kristen Headlam, 23 August 2018 – 17 February 2019, Noel Shaw Gallery, University of Melbourne)*

Trevor Prout (known behind his back as 'Brussels' to friend and foe alike) had to deliver on a promise. Asked what his priority would be if appointed to the position of Vice-Chancellor, University of Central Tasmania (UCT), he espoused a bold vision: to institute a root-and-branch makeover of the university's image. Beleaguered by northern and southern competitors, the Selection Committee grasped at any straw that would rescue UCT from oblivion in the course of yet another widely-expected round of mergers. Geography counted against continued existence – the usual resort was to put universities together that preyed together; so, Trevor's scheme was to distinguish UCT in such a way as to avoid its capture by a neighbour.

Now installed, Trevor appointed a consultancy firm, 'Brand News' – a small operation that specialised in image-making – to advise on the makeover. Trevor asked its Managing Director, Nobby Benton, to come up with a revised mission statement. For Nobby, mission statements were old-hat. Aspirational pieties, he called them. The task was to knock the organisation into shape; and doing that was all about re-shaping the university's narrative. He said the discursive strategy was to evidence that the university's accomplishment was written in the wind, as it were. Nobby had picked up 'discursive strategy' from an article in one of a pile of journals he kept beside the lavatory for occasional reading. The device consisted in positing a contrast then landing on one side of

it – by turning spatiality on its head in UCT's case. By going so far as was possible in the opposite direction to its regional preoccupation.

Globalisation had been a widely adopted institutional target in days of yore; and even without outposts in foreign parts, some places continued to count it as a defining feature of institutional worth. Sure, an international presence, a global reach, was a good thing. But UCT was a boutique university with academic emphases on trees and snow. More than travel across Bass Strait to a university in the Apple Isle was required – a story about fulfilling a destiny, of being equipped by character to venture beyond ordinary limits, to encounter a new frontier.

Character is destiny, so the university's narrative – its now-preferred story from creation to accomplishment, and beyond – depended on identifying new destinations. Why not voyaging into Space? What better than to adopt another name, such as The University of the Milky Way (UMW)? True, another university 'owned' the Southern Cross but having that in its title was more to do with flag-wagging and hinting at a quasi-religious affiliation than with getting up there and getting something out of it. Again, a bunch of fancy-pants at two West Australian universities sought to engage local computer addicts, citizen scientists, in contributing to a surveying task – ring-fencing the boundaries of galaxies. The endeavour indicated the correspondence of galactic goings-on and the fate of higher education amalgamations.

The leader of an underlying astronomical research project, Professor Simon Driver, explained: 'So far we think that right after the Big Bang, gravity started to pull galaxies together, and then they went through a period when there was lots of merging, lots of collisions, and violent episodes leading to distorted looking galaxies.'

## Implementation

Educationally speaking, the culmination of the UMW narrative amounted to recruiting planetary punters. 'Space' touched all the visionary buttons, not of a university with 'a mission to change lives and change the world' as another Australian regional university had it but one of charting courses to untold worlds and changing lives there, if any. In a way, this scheme was an updated globalisation project: students from other planets rather than from other countries were the resource to be mined. As Nobby reflected, in the good old days of that model of globalisation, the British Empire, we sold the natives glass beads and other trinkets, and now we sell them MBAs – *plus ça change...*

The Council bought the idea. So did state and federal governments. It satisfied the innovation thing without going into means; and it met the ideal of narrative: to bring down the high and bring up the low, or vice versa. So, one small place in Tasmania would jump up and over all those big joints on the Mainland; and like all good narratives this one established an aiming-point, a

culmination, and was open-ended. Who knows? Maybe there was more than one universe out there ... However, Trevor cautioned against going too far. As he told Brand News: 'It's not what we actually do, it's the vibe, a dream. People will get on board the idea, not the delivery. "Milky Way" is a catchy title.'

Some dissenters wanted to tell Brussels he was dreamin' and a bit had to be done in order to give the semblance of pursuit. If there were inhabitants out there who could be persuaded to give UMW a go, then entry requirements had to be tailored to fit their circumstances. One plan was to require applicants from outer space to be adept in the Austral tongue. A few made bold to question its presumed superiority. Trevor asked cunning linguists on the staff to come up with answers. Their first proposal was to make a lingua franca out of a simplified version of English. As they said, the aim should be 'to shorten discourse by cutting polysyllables into one, and leaving out verbs and participles, because in reality, all things imaginable are but nouns.' Then there was a second project: 'a scheme for entirely abolishing all words whatsoever'; and hence the expedient 'that since words are only names for things, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express a particular business they are to discourse on.' Another great advantage proposed by this invention, its advocates argued, 'was that it would serve as a universal language to be understood in all civilised nations, whose goods and utensils are generally of the same

kind, or nearly resembling, so that their uses might easily be comprehended.' Since encounters with other beings were very many light years away, the easiest course was to put the matter aside for the moment.

Nevertheless, UMW had to be re-jigged to fit the narrative. So various bits of it were put into a Bragg School of Astral Dreaming. Here was a win-win name: though William Bragg occupied a Chair in Mathematics (and taught Physics) at the University of Adelaide from 1886 to the end of 1908, and his son, William Lawrence, had completed his first degree there, they may well have known something about Tasmania, maybe even have passed that way – it was a long shot but, having been jointly awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1915, a putative association was sufficient to justify adding the prestige of their surname to the new school; besides, including 'Dreaming' genuflected to cosmological understandings of the original (but abominably-treated) inhabitants.

You could, as 'Brand News' did, invent a faux tradition. To live up to it, in the name of Quality, the consultants introduced a template approach: the standardisation of product by way of a clutch of

course and subject pro formas, to be completed by biochemists and the few remaining metaphysicians alike; and to be tested with the full rigour of marketing and human resources expertise. The consultants said this was 'protecting the Brand'.

## Brussels, beam me up!

Better still for Trevor and his minions to protect the brand by attending to appearances, by turning the narrative into a marketing scheme. Had they also turned the idea of narrative as a literary device into a formulary of institutional conformity? Having already joined the ranks of in-words, 'narrative' was a fortuitous appropriation. Building a narrative was a means to an end.

Myth became the message – encouragement for outsiders to join and imperative for insiders to keep in line. The good news conveyed by the narrative was that troops were got to believe in (or at least to say) the same thing. All hands were set to making UMW fit the vision that was embodied in the narrative. The trick was to turn a wand into a truncheon: to marshal the 'troops' (as Nobby was wont to call them) in serried ranks behind their staff officers. What followed from espousal of its unifying objective was reinforcement of a command structure. 'One badge of honour, one collective' became the creed of compliant Milky Way-ites. But, as so often is the case, calls for togetherness demonstrate the absence of it.

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That was the problem with the 'discursive' part of a discursive strategy. A conjuring trick of Frog intellectuals, 'discourse' settles, via Anglophone literary criticism, in companionable rest amongst the linguistic sediment of management consultancy. A discursive strategy is a contradiction in terms: discourse is fluid, strategy is fixed; and an institutional narrative is a strategy, the rule, the law. No allowance is made for discourse, for difference. A makeover is the work of a cosmetician.

'Looking up at the stars, I know quite well

That, for all they care, I can go to hell,

But on earth indifference is the least

We have to dread from man or beast.'

21 August 2019

*Arthur O'Neill is a Carlton Pensioner, maintained by the State to evidence its benign intention in clothing and feeding wastrels of a bygone age.*

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## Notes and sources

Nobby had picked up 'discursive strategy' from reading an article ...:

'Populism is typically understood as a discursive strategy opposing the people and the elite, with populists claiming to represent the first against the second. But the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe, an advocate of left-wing populism, argued persuasively that it also implies a vertical form of power and requires a charismatic leader.'

Didier Fassin, 'Macron's War,' *London Review of Books*, 41 (13), 4 July 2019, p. 24.

even without outposts in foreign parts, some places continued to count it [a global presence] as a defining feature ...:

Thus, in a full-page advertisement (headed 'OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXCEPTIONAL ACADEMICS WHO WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE') Flinders University affirms: 'Join us on our journey as we endeavour to become an Australian top 10 university, and amongst the top 1% in the world.' The foot-line to this advertisement is:

'SOUTH AUSTRALIA • NORTHERN TERRITORY • GLOBAL • ONLINE'

*The Weekend Australian*, 'World,' July 13-14 2019, p. 14.

and it met the ideal of narrative: to bring down the high and bring up the low ...:

As noted by a book reviewer (about popular tales included in *Itch, Clap, Pox: Venereal Disease in the 18th-Century Imagination* by Noelle Gallagher):

'These inversions – high brought low; low elevated (temporarily) high; the triumph of the lesser over the greater – are characteristic of the unsettling social narratives the pox or the clap could be used to tell.'

Claire Bucknell, 'Colonel Cundum's Domanin' *London Review of Books*, 44(14) 18 July 2019, p. 29.

ring-fencing the boundaries of galaxies...

Curtin University and the University of Western Australia are sole partners in a joint venture supported by the West Australian Government, the International Centre for Radio Astronomy Research (ICRAR). The Centre invites 'citizen scientists' to contribute to its 'Galaxy and Mass Assembly (GAMA)' research project:

'Astro Quest are looking for volunteer astronomers to study crowded images of galaxies and work out which light is coming from which galaxy. All you need is a computer and the internet.

### REGISTER FOR ASTROQUEST

Astronomers have been looking deep into the universe and surveying millions of galaxies. But to help find discoveries in these surveys we need to carefully identify the boundary of every galaxy. Computers are pretty good at this, but they don't always get it right. That's where you come in! We need your help to inspect each galaxy and make sure we have the right result.'

<https://www.icrar.org/outreach-education/outreach-initiatives/citizen-science/>

and

'In our previous project, Galaxy Explorer, citizen scientists were asked to classify galaxies and to fit a ring around each one.'

<https://astroquest.net.au/science/guide-to-astroquest/>

'So far we think that right after the Big Bang ...:

Astro Quest, under the heading 'Galaxy evolution has changed through the history of the universe' and quoting Professor Simon Driver, leader of the GAMA project.

<https://astroquest.net.au/science/the-science/>

'a mission to change lives and change the world' as another Australian regional university had it ...:

op.cit., Flinders University. *The Weekend Australian*, 'World,' July 13-14 2019, p. 14.

'to shorten discourse, by cutting polysyllables into one, and leaving out verbs and participles...:

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1985 [1726]). Part 3, Ch. 5 ('The author is permitted to see the grand Academy of Lagado. The Academy largely described. The arts wherein the professors employ themselves'), p. 230. London: Penguin Classics.

'a scheme for entirely abolishing all words whatsoever ...': *ibid.*, p. 230.

'Another great advantage proposed by this invention ...': op. cit., Swift, p. 231.

A conjuring trick of Frog intellectuals, 'discourse' ...:

See for example, Jacques Derrida (tr. Barbara Johnson) *Plato's Pharmacy* (1981 [1968]), London, The Athlone Press, p.78:

'Logos – "discourse" – has the meaning here [in Plato's *Phaedrus*] of argument, line of reasoning, guiding thread animating the spoken discussion (the Logos).'

'Looking up at the stars, I know quite well/ ...:

W. H. Auden, first of four stanzas in 'The More Loving One' *Selected Poems*, London, Faber and Faber, 1979 [September 1957], p. 237.