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RESEARCH REPORT

Universities are funny places!

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Universities are funny places. They have a strong sense of hierarchy and rank. They have an amazing disparity in salary levels and status between staff, are class conscious, and are run by a large bureaucracy that oils and keeps the machinery going. They operate as educational institutions and yet also are entrepreneurial, marketing themselves in a competitive search for students and research resources. Most are in the public education sector but a few are private; they are closely scrutinised by governments and have to perform and make account of themselves to government authorities yet offer little accountability to the lower echelons of their workforce by the managerialist-inspired

elite upper ranks; and have had to come to grips with enormous social, political and cultural change to the world, nation and local contexts.

There are many academic tribes and territories within the university community (Becher 1989). Some academic disciplines are more conservative than others (Lawless 2004), and they straddle professional education as well as broad education.

I have worked in all three of South Australia's universities, and both of its medical schools in a career in the university and not-for-profit community sector. I have worked in the conservative disciplines such as management studies and medicine, and also in the more progressive ones such as Aboriginal studies. I have worked in student unions, in the central administration units and in the academic disciplines of the Australian higher education sector. I am currently working in an academic school of commerce investigating the pharmaceutical industry while also studying as a postgraduate. What has been my most common experience as a researcher, educator, student and administrator in this sector since 1975? It has been the diversity of it all, and the driving need to understand this strange beast and to celebrate its strengths and delights and bemoan its weaknesses and horrors. Relationships between staff and students can be delightful, exhilarating and inspiring, rich with solidarity and hope, but also can turn into horror stories of misunderstanding, snobbery, bullying, whitewashed racism and nuanced sexism.

As a workforce, it has some unique qualities. There are unique opportunities for the university workforce to have thinking valued, to be allowed to spend time on thinking and conversation, to consider and reflect together in conversation and to work and co-author together, while also working in difficult and demanding jobs and careers. Having worked outside of the university sector, I am aware how rarely employers value and encourage critical thinking and discussion, or abstract and conceptual exploration of ideas.

University workforces do this and sometimes they do it well. Another thing they sometimes do is enter into solidarity with marginalised communities and address issues of social justice and the urgent need for social change that transforms society for the better. Having worked in several of the fractious disciplines and tribal territories of academia, I have realised that progressive people ready to act – not just talk and think – for social justice are everywhere in the university sector. A conservative academic discipline such as medicine can be home to people deeply concerned for racial and gender justice and for transformation of inequity – and everywhere in this complex, contradictory and diverse workforce are people who want to think, talk but most importantly act together for social justice and against inequity. They look at students as learners not customers, and as people with whom to work in solidarity rather than products on a conveyor belt.

Could it be that, in this strange beast known as the university, it is possible to educate, not just train, and possible to seek wisdom and build compassion and solidarity within a community, to build an experience that working in the academy is more than just a day job which pays the bills?

Universities are just as diverse, contradictory and complex as any social institution or social phenomena. Hang about – for a researcher that means they are themselves a potential research question, doesn't it! My goodness, it even poses a question for a doctoral study.

I am currently designing a research project which will investigate the university as a community engaging in activism for social justice. Are universities really a place able, and with the capacity, to do more than just replicate and reproduce the inequities of a hierarchical, capitalist, competitive and adversarial society? Do they replicate the norms of social inequity – can they also be places which dissent, resist inequity and seek hope for, and even successfully create, social justice? Is it possible to see each other, staff and students, as a community, as

“agents of change rather than as mere objects of economic necessity” (Hillcole Group 1997). Is radical wisdom possible in the university setting?

References

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RESEARCH REPORT

What is the moral imperative of workplace learning: Unlocking the DaVinci code of human resource development?

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In the course of my doctoral study, I am exploring the strategic linkages between learning activities in the modern workplace and the long term success they bring to organisations. For many years, this challenge has been the Holy Grail of human resource development practitioners, who invest heavily on training and professional development projects each year but readily admit to their inadequacies when it comes to evaluating the full benefits. In the UK