

No *Brideshead Revisited*, no summer of love in the empty quadrangle: challenges to scholarship in the on-line age

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Abstract: As scholars we value the belief that we are part of a pedagogical project that challenges and critiques contemporary society, and that replicates itself with new generations of critics. We celebrate the arrival of the online era, with its multiple opportunities for facilitation of research, and the engagement and enrichment of the student experience. But has the new media gone too far in replacing the actual with the virtual, and what implications has the adoption of the online model of pedagogy on the on-campus student experience? The positive of online university is that it enriches and democratises, and allows disadvantaged and lower SES students to study in their own time and place, whether in Bangalow or Beijing. The authors consider the evolution of the online mode to become the increasingly dominant discourse at the Wiki-University of the future, supplanting the physical campus in its central position in the student experience. Increasingly compelled to respond to marketplace concerns, the corporate university presents a new learning experience that displaces students from the physical campus and allows them to embark on a fragmented part-time education where the learning experience can be compartmentalised, sidelined or marginalised to accommodate other pressing Gen Y concerns. The student narrative has changed and become diluted and depoliticised, and is in danger of reflecting instrumental values of credentialism with reduced scope for wider cultural learning. Representing different disciplinary perspectives, the authors of this paper chart the evolution of the on-campus student experience. They argue that while virtual education facilitates access to learning, if mismanaged the removal of the actual student from the spaces of the campus has the potential to create an empty credentialing virtual institution where actual students will be incidental not essential, with vastly altered learning experiences.

Student expectations of university life may be partly understood through the discursive formations present in popular culture. Has the trend towards on-line teaching significantly changed the campus experience for traditional on-campus students? People used to “attend” or “go to” university – now they “do” university. This paper questions what expectations on-campus students bring to university life and surveys popular representations of campus life as part of a broader discussion about understanding university life, the recent moves toward more on-line teaching and the changing ways that students engage with universities.

The scope of this paper is a reflection on the changing nature of the university’s relationship with on-campus school-leaving age students. This is not to diminish the importance of traditional distance mode, which constitutes a significant percentage of students; however the expectations and lived experience of the traditional distance education student are quite different to those of the on-campus student. Our key focus in this paper is on university engagement with school leaver on-campus students and their lived experience within an environment of increasing reliance on on-line teaching materials. As Coates, James and Baldwin (2005) observe, there has been a rapid adoption of campus wide Learning

Management Systems (including on-line delivery of materials), but that the use of these methods of teaching as an adjunct to, or indeed replacement of, traditional learning modes has not been the subject of extensive study beyond comparisons of software systems available.

This significant change in universities' delivery mode would have bearing on expectations of what it is to attend university. The resulting changes in the relationship between student and university effects the roles of each. A potential student's own expectation of their personal level of engagement and commitment to study may also be affected. There is the possibility that for some students, "doing university" becomes more transactional, akin to shopping on e-bay or simply seen as a series of basic tasks to be completed. In this way the student's enthusiasm for study and to engage with ideas, their immersion in a culture of exploration and learning becomes much more their own responsibility, with the on-campus teacher distanced or placed at a level commensurate with their on-line presence and materials. The student has a choice to attend class, or to consume the packaged materials on-line.

There are a great many benefits to on-line delivery and engagement, especially for distance students, and like any technology it must be used efficiently and to effect for the best possible outcomes. This is an issue of balance, and consideration, not of rejection of one system over another. With a focus on the traditional on-campus student and the changing nature of university engagement, let us consider the first stage of a student's engagement with tertiary study; the perception of what a university is and what university life is like.

When one asks "what is university?" the answer is manifold. However, the university experience may be roughly divided into two areas, the first being the formal learning, assessment and attaining of prescribed skills and knowledges and the second being the broader social experience. Both of these serve to make up "campus life".

The first of these categories, focused on assessable skills and qualities, is more easily quantified and it is this that universities centre on when designing formal teaching and educational requirements. In contemporary Australia the attributes that graduates are expected to have may be codified by the university, for example, desirable graduate attributes at the University of Southern Queensland are clearly listed as:

Discipline expertise - evidence of analytical engagement with the theoretical knowledge of your chosen discipline

Professional practice - evidence of the skills required for effective participation in your chosen working environment

Global citizenship - evidence of students' ability to connect discipline-based theory and practice to the sustainability of communities, economies and environments in a global context

Scholarship - the capabilities to make a scholarly contribution to your workplace and wider communities

Lifelong learning - evidence of independent, life-long learning.

(University of Southern Queensland 2009)

These are justifiably the desirable attributes of a university graduate, and they reflect the 1873 statement by British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli that a university should be "a place of light, liberty and learning" (Brown 1999). These codified attributes may be tested through the

assessment processes, but tied to them are broader skills, knowledges and ways of seeing that may be enhanced through the freedom, experimentation, and association with others of diverse backgrounds and opinions that on-campus university life is thought to bring. These interactions include, but go beyond, a form of phatic communication. These experiences are formative in the development of identity and attitudes that may be carried into later life. This then, at its basis, is a question of epistemology rather than solely being one of pedagogy (or, in fact, andragogy) alone.

The epistemological conundrum arises in separating the formal learned information, which may be written in a book or on a website and may be narrow and discipline specific, and the understanding and implementing of knowledge and critical thinking skills which may be developed through interaction of the student with a variety of others. The graduate attributes listed above allude to these broader notions with phrases such as:

...skills required for *effective participation*

...students' ability to *connect* discipline-based *theory and practice* to the sustainability of *communities, economies and environments in a global context*

... *contribution* to your workplace and *wider communities*

[And finally, the developing of a lived, reflective epistemology in the concept of continual personal review, growth, and development through what is called “Life-long learning”:]

...Lifelong learning - evidence of *independent, life-long learning*.

(University of Southern Queensland 2009 emphasis added)

To understand popular conceptions of campus life, we turn to a necessarily brief survey of opinion-shaping popular culture texts signifying the dominant popular discourses on university life; often reflecting a time of individual extension, experimentation with ideas and the development of self identity. These texts tend to focus almost exclusively on the lived social experience of university, rather than the formal learning - which may be alluded to, but is substratum to the narrative discourse.

Shaping opinions of the imagined university

There is a delightful British-ness in the fact that Liverpool Hispaniscist Edgar Allison Peers (also known by his pseudonym Bruce Truscott) created his seminal account *Redbrick University* (Truscott 1943) at the height of a war. In this he reflected on the role and purpose of the university, on the place of research, and the way student experiences differed between those who experienced university life away from home with the enriched Oxbridge experience, in contrast to the more utilitarian redbrick experience of the Victorian era regional universities. He saw the university as not just a place of study, but as a holistic environment.

What we might choose to call the classic image of the University can be reflected in that vision of Oxbridge perhaps most faithfully articulated in the early chapters of Evelyn Waugh's 1945 novel *Brideshead Revisited* (2008). His account, written towards the end of the war against fascism and almost contemporaneous to Redbrick was not an isolated depiction, but is a classic of this genre. Another less enduring example was Nicholas Monsarrat's semiautobiographical *This is the schoolroom* (1939) which paints a similar picture of 1920s

and '30s sybaritic upper class indulgence, although in Monsarrat's case conflated with a veneer of left wing anti-fascist activism. In *Brideshead Revisited*, university gives the student the opportunity to learn about the world – neither Charles Ryder or Sebastian Flyte have an overly academic focus, but enjoy a freedom, which ultimately comes at a significant cost. We might consider that this depiction of the university was outdated and obsolete even when it was first promulgated, yet this mythic discourse has been strangely enduring. The desire to emulate Oxbridge is seen in the far-flung corners of the former empire and in more recent times than we might expect. From the mid 1980s the University of Queensland Student Union replicated the Great Court Race from *Chariots of Fire* in subtropical Queensland, and in 2010 Queensland conservative opposition leader John-Paul Langebroek was a figure of public ridicule when it was revealed that as an undergraduate in the 1980s he had, for a time, emulated Sebastian Flyte and carried a teddy bear around campus (AAP 2009).

Another more recent picture of the on-campus university experience is that of the late 1960s to early 1970s 'Summer of Love' era of sexual and social freedoms, student protest, and challenges. A variety of characters inhabit this realm in David Lodge's *Changing Places* (1975), where readers can identify with the experiences of the very British Phillip Swallow when he has a sabbatical in place of the archetypal Californian Moris Zapp, exchanging the grimy and grim Midlands University of Rummige for the exciting, permissive west coast Plotinus University at Euphoria. Likewise Howard Kirk as a subversive (yet lecherous) lecturer in *The History Man* (Bradbury 1975) captured the feeling of an era of political awareness, social activism - and careerism.

As the 1970s drew to a close, there was a new image of permissiveness, often crude and sexist, that progresses from the liberties of the late 1960s and 1970s toward more questionable values. *Animal House* (Landis 1978) as a cult film is irreverent, tasteless, hedonistic, and anti-authoritarian, and while set in late 1960s with references to the challenge of the Vietnam War, it provided models for the narratives of university life into the 1980s. To the students of the 1980s, *Animal House* presented modelling for Toga parties and other licentious behavior that is only now facing challenge (Hurst 2010). The film provided a clear discourse that the university was a place of experimentation and defiance of authority. For all their apparently simple message of male centric debauchery, American films in this genre will often include a narrative of a subordinated group eventually triumphing over a dominant or oppressive group, an example being the nerds versus jocks in *Revenge of the Nerds* (Kanew 1984). Along the way they may indulge all manner of hedonistic predilections, but the innate message could be well disposed to a Marxist reading in that creativity and challenging the established order can result in a worthwhile outcome. Any hint of ideological redemption disappears, however, with the advent of more dissolute and commercialised narratives of the University in the form of light-porn sex comedy films such as *Spring Break* (Cunningham 1983). In this reference there is little study at university, virtually no intellectual development, memories of anti-Vietnam protests are long gone and college life is nothing but fun.

In the carefree greed-is-good era of the corporate 1990s attending university was an enjoyable life experience. Beyers (2005) chose 'Those happy golden years' as the title of her examination of the mainstream television phenomena of *Beverly Hills 90210* (Star 1990-2000). This vastly popular television series that transitions from high school to university at California University (filmed at the real-life Occidental College) showed student viewers around the world what they could expect when they went to university. While neither author was a devotee of the program, we have forced ourselves to explore this realm and conclude that it wasn't all bad. Despite the focus on individual success and indulgent materialism in a cast of predominantly white upper middle-class stars set against ethnically diverse minor

characters active in the background, the themes that are mentioned can be positive. There is some exploration of the socially significant issues such as date rape, racism, animal rights, denunciation of anti-Semitism, charity work, reclaiming the night and sexuality issues, but the nightly focus is mostly on University providing the good times. There is some occasional study, although as Beyers says, mostly in relation to concerns about failing. You don't want to fail university and drop out, because if you did the in-crowd might forget to invite you to the next pool party. Again, the dominant discourse of hedonism comes strongly through the text.

More recent literary works in the "campus novel" genre include Stephen Fry's *The Liar* (1991) and *Making History* (1996) which are set almost entirely on university campuses in Oxford and in America. Again, the discourse is one of youth, and a form of freedom and adventure that brings formative personal growth.

Campus fictions have long fermented in popular culture, providing powerful discourses about the liberties and freedoms associated with university life. Much like the 'mythology' of universities, these powerful series of signs are part of the discursive formations (structures of knowledge, or epistemes) proposed by Foucault, which both constitute and exert power over objects in the social realm (2002).

While there is great variety in the depictions of universities and their students, and while some of the questionable and anti-social practices associated with some of these texts would not be acceptable today, the consistently reinforced discourses are centered around youth (away from parental guidance for perhaps the first time), the freedom to experiment, a form of adventure, exploration, and personal growth. These discourses must inform part of a prospective student's understanding and expectations of university life. They are reinforced to the level of mythology, even with non-fiction accounts of university life, as can be found in Seaman's detailed exploration of United States student experiences (Seaman 2005). It seems the freedom for self exploration while at university has benefitted many throughout our society, including political leaders such as Queensland Premier Anna Bligh, who was the subject of a television programme in the series *Australian Story* on ABC Television.

In the ABC TV program, former student union president Eugene O'Sullivan recalled the Premier's days in the union.

"Anna came from the five foot four feminist faction, who were a left wing, Marxist, feminist group ... fairly strident, hairy arm-pitted type women who were either lesbian separatists or running a fairly anti-bloke line," he told the program.

But Ms Bligh wasn't bothered by the anecdote.

"I think we're all young once and we do some silly things, and as I say, each to their own," she said. (AAP 2009)

Bligh's comment alludes to youthful passions within the safe environment for experimentation that is university. These valuable learning experiences as an undergraduate activist would have shaped the woman who is today's Premier of Queensland.

The evolution of the on-campus experience today

Having discussed these representations, signifying images and popular narratives constructing university life, we now look at on-campus student experiences today to find they are certainly varied, but (unsurprisingly) more tame than that depicted through media. Student life can

include some activism, for example, the support given by students at the University of Southern Queensland in opposition to the racially offensive “Nigger Brown” nametag on a local football stadium. This issue is discussed at some length by Andrew Hickey, Jon Austin and Stephen Hagan (2007). There are some students who demonstrate concern with ethical and environmental issues and enjoy the celebration of diversity as seen in Harmony Day. Former iconic acts of public hedonistic behaviour such as the Ruthven Rush (Grant 2007, French 2009, 294-5), a student drinking activity that involved teams of students running from one pub to another drinking a beer and running on accompanied by navigator and a bucket holder, have been replaced by more private socially acceptable hedonism in restrained themed parties at the Student Club with police checks on drug use and security guard investigations of underage drinkers.

In theory, the physical presence of large residential colleges to accommodate students should lead to an active student life on-campus. While some of the more liberal experimentation may well take place within the privacy of the residential college, increasingly students are choosing to study off-campus with apparent concomitant impacts on traditional student life for the remaining on-campus students.

There may be a great many factors at play which affect student engagement in a broader campus life. Certainly the former Howard Government’s introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism was thought to have an effect on campus life and was the subject of much discussion (Richardson 2005, Rochford 2006). Again, during this same period of the Howard Government, the changing nature of work, the casualisation of the workforce and the rise of contracting and the ‘enterprise worker’ was significant (Hall 2006). Where before people may have had the same jobs or careers for their entire working life, that is no longer the expectation. This casualisation of work identity may also have played a role in shaping student identity, pushing it more towards a casual or less engaged approach in line with the changes in society more broadly. The contemporary student is likely to be undertaking some form of paid work (likely casual) while they are studying (Devlin, James, Grigg 2008) and this too plays a role in their identity as a student, as well as the time they have available to them to participate in campus life. For these students on-line teaching makes university life more flexible and easier to compartmentalise into the rest of their time demands. On-line teaching meets a need, but in doing so changes engagement and invites more distance between the student and the university.

On-line teaching is an exceptionally valid response to the broader changes in society and while the authors are at pains to note that on-line teaching is certainly not the only factor of change affecting engagement, we have chosen on-line teaching as a focus because it is a significant, clear and obvious factor that is not external to the university and that, therefore, the universities themselves do have some control over.

In their 2005 paper, Nelson Laird and Kuh discuss the potential benefits of students’ use of information technology and its relationship to other aspects of student engagement, but note that the evidence of a positive benefit was limited to date. They noted that students were using information technology more and show that from the mid to late 1990s student use of email grew 550%, and that nearly half of all courses surveyed had on-line content by 1998. “Students appear to use the Internet to communicate with others and to find materials and assistance with their coursework” (Nelson Laird and Kuh 2005, 212). This is unsurprising as it reflects the changes in society more broadly, towards a rapid adoption of information technology as a social and communication tool. While emailing the lecturer provides contact with the university and assistance with coursework, and the internet provides access to a vast

range of information of varying academic quality (including material to plagiarise), the student needs to be well equipped with the skills required to make judicious use of the technology and information to hand.

Nelson Laird and Kuh acknowledge that there was some debate about the benefits of the use of technology and that what studies there were had mixed results, including an apparent disadvantage to students of a lower socio-economic background (Nelson Laird and Kuh 2005, 212). These early studies were limited, often relied on students' own self-reported perceptions of gains and tended to reflect upon the potential possible future benefits as they were seen at the time. The rise of web 2.0 and a more interactive on-line environment has quickly dated some of these earlier preliminary studies; however they do make the point that student engagement can no longer be considered a distinct issue from the use of information technology.

Most research studies treat student use of information technology as a separate form of student engagement. However, as Kennedy (2000) suggests, perhaps information technology is a vehicle by which students increase their engagement in areas such as active and collaborative learning or student-faculty interaction. "Used appropriately and in concert with powerful pedagogical approaches, technology is supposed to enhance student learning productivity" (Kuh and Vesper cited in Nelson Laird and Kuh 2005, 213)

The on-line university has tremendous positives in that it enriches and democratizes, and allows remote, disadvantaged and lower socio-economic students the option to study in their own time and place, whether in Byron Bay or Baghdad. It also allows potentially greater access to a range of reference sources through on-line scholarly journals. Conversely, the evolution of the on-line mode as a dominant discourse within a university has challenged the physical campus in its central position in the student experience. Increasingly compelled to respond to marketplace concerns, the corporate university is presenting a new learning experience that displaces students from the physical campus and allows them to embark on a fragmented part-time education where the learning experience may be compartmentalized, sidelined or marginalised to accommodate other pressing Gen Y concerns.

While certainly of immense value to distance students, the availability of comprehensive on-line materials for students enrolled on-campus negates the requirement to actually attend classes to receive the formal components of their study, and diminishes the rich, diverse experience of campus life. It is as if students appear to be saying that if they don't have to turn up to classes why leave the confines of the college or the rented flat to actually go to university, when it is easier to stay in your hyper-connected room and look at the on-line version offered. Consumerist values are also at play in reducing student presence. We live in a market dominated era where students perceive that they must work to obtain ever more material possessions, and so these work demands may mean younger local students increasingly take the on-line option, after doing perhaps a first year on-campus. The second and third year courses can be completed on-line, while still having the convenience of living in college or a student flat away from parental censure.

For better or worse, the physical campus is no longer central to the student experience of attending university. Student communities have become fragmented and student life lacks rich (inter)personal discourses expected. Indeed, the student clubs and societies on-campus are challenged by declining on-campus student attendees, and reduced student interest as students increasingly focus on private-sphere activities. Potentially, the institution has lost its

facilitative role in shaping the wider learning experience and moves this life-learning to the borderlands.

In the early 1970s students were enthusiastic supporters of the protests against the rugby tour by a racially selected South African team. Would students be at the protest today? Or would they be too busy serving the food and drinks during the game? They may well have social consciences, but this is developed externally to engagement in the university, and the university itself will be poorer for this. Diversity in social relations will not be fostered - when non-attending students want to socialise, they're more likely to go out with their friends from work or school, rather than the diverse new friends they could have made at university. The enriching experience of talking to the overseas student before class, or the mature aged student and sharing in her life experiences will be gone. Our political life will be poorer also. Abbott and Costello were student union operatives – we won't have them in the future, and neither will we have Stott-Despoja or Gillard. The leaders of tomorrow will get their management experience from McDonalds and Myers, not from running the Student Union, coordinating Amnesty, or organizing a protest.

The student experience and narrative have changed and become sanitised and depoliticised, and are in danger of reflecting instrumental values of credentialism with reduced scope for wider cultural learning. We consider that the removal of the student from the spaces of the campus has the potential to create an empty, credentialing, virtual institution with vastly altered learning experiences. The university, as it is traditionally understood, will change, and on-campus students will lose the chance to gain broader skills, knowledges and ways of seeing. The challenge then, for the on-line university, is to truly use digital delivery in ways where it does have advantages over printed materials. Technology should be seamless and invisible with the focus on the engaging content material, rather than the technology that delivers it. The on-line university must offer a diverse range of experiences and encourage more active involvement from the student body if it is to go some way towards replacing the broader social experience of campus life that has long been mythologised as being significant in an individual's life-long development.

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