

## **Knowing in uncertain times: optimism, ignorance and flexible learning**

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The paper presents an argument for a dual track approach - innovation and adaptation - to the challenges of reinventing university culture as they scramble to position themselves in relation to challenges like globalisation, commercialisation, and the increasing availability and capacities of information technologies. The subject of this paper is how individuals and organisations have responded to these challenges. The discussion focuses on the response of individualised innovation - lone ranging. This approach leads to valuable outcomes, but is inadequate as the institutional response. A second approach - a process of adaptation - is offered as a strategy for engaging a critical mass of staff with flexible learning. A five phase process for adaptation is described, along with several pre-conditions for its success.

New corporate missions, managerial strategies and forms of communication technology are impinging on academic workers in unprecedented ways. It is no secret that universities are scrambling to position themselves in relation to challenges like globalisation, commercialisation, and the increasing availability and capacities of information technologies. People who work within them are experiencing a sense of insecurity and identity crises as they are buffeted by changes in both demands and the resources they have available to meet those demands, and as they are caught up in this undignified scramble (Nixon, 1996). The policy discussion paper of the West Review (West, 1997) includes reference to this sense of crisis: 'There is a feeling of unease in the universities ... higher education has ... lost its way and is rudderless in a sea of change' (p. 1). These are indications of problematic 'new times' in the higher education sector in Australia.

I am using the term 'crisis' to represent a time within which a situation of deterioration either moves towards improvement, or moves more rapid deterioration. Thus, it represents a time in which decisions about how to respond effectively to particular challenges are urgently sought. However, I am not suggesting that a crisis is necessarily resolved by a single set of decisions. Decisions may reverse, delay or even accelerate further deterioration, or cause a new crisis. However, without them, an intensification in the rate and scope, and therefore effects, of deterioration can be expected.

In this context, 'knowing' confronts uncertainty. What I am implying is that, in the context of 'new times', much of the decision making involves a significant investment of optimism and ignorance. Some of that ignorance is inevitable - by definition 'innovation' involve going beyond the usual - the predictable. On the other hand, the actual approach we adopt at an organisational level can appear overly romantic and naive. My purpose here is to offer both a critique of the primary current approach to the challenges noted above, and an alternative approach which is more in keeping with what Patti Lather (in McWilliam, Lather & Morgan, 1996) terms 'non-stupid optimism'.

In the context of these challenges, the reference to identity crises invites a recognition that former practices and roles have decreasing 'survival' value. There is an urgent need to develop and trial alternatives. Where might we look for such alternatives?

### Technology as demon and saviour

One of the most lauded possibilities involves the increased use of communication and information technologies (CITs) within more traditional teaching and learning environments. The report of the Dearing Committee makes such calls. Nearer to home, the West document offers the view that technology is both demon and potential saviour. West speaks of the digital revolution as 'happening' in quite a relentless and totalising way: 'Over the next twenty years universities will be affected significantly by the revolutionary developments taking place in information and communication technologies' (p.9, my italics). Later, the discussion paper includes the claim that 'Over the next twenty years ... the changes wrought by the digital revolution will be so pervasive that universities will be forced to fundamentally rethink every aspect of the way in which they provide their services' (p. 11, my italics).

The message is clear - former practices and roles have to give way to the digital juggernaut if institutions are to continue to offer employment to those who work within them. This is the knowing of technological determinism.

A 'technology-as-saviour' theme is also evident in the West paper. This is most obvious in the Foreword, where the following claim is made:

.. [O]ur eyes are being opened to extraordinary possibilities in the provision of education through ever expanding technological advance. The opportunities for adult learning in the future can be scarcely imagined. New learning methods must be eagerly embraced to cater for a far more diverse - more discriminating - student body. (p. vii) The underlying argument is that only through the increased use of technology can institutions 'provide services in ways that meet student expectations at the lowest possible cost' (p. 13). The alignment of the use of CITs with minimising increases in costs is hardly novel, or unexpected. The only problem is that this alignment has little empirical evidence to support it. At this point in time it represents wishful thinking. The figures quoted in the West paper focus on the costs of delivery, but it is not clear that the costs of the development are included. There is a pressing need to broaden the discussion beyond this simplistic level of analysis.

### Flexible learning = student centred?

It seems that every sustained discussions of the future of teaching and learning in higher education includes a reference to the need for increased flexibility. The Dearing Committee called for it, and so does the West discussion paper. The term is almost always implies disapproval of old 'inflexible', institution and/or academic focused practices. For example, the West paper argues:

The location, content and mode of delivery of education should be built on a relationship between the student and the provider, not the views of administrators concerning what students want and what institutions are able to provide. Students should be the ones to make decisions about their study options. (p. 4 - italics in original) It seems entirely reasonable to suggest that the term 'flexible' is used primarily to signal a move to a more student/client centred approach to higher education, as implied in the italicised section of this extract.

However, the precise meaning of 'student-centred' is unclear in many such documents. Some commentators use it in ways similar to the West paper - to indicate an intention to provide students with more choices (eg, of location, content and mode of delivery). Here student-centredness has a flavour of a menu of options - a learning supermarket. Most institutions have already attempted to increase the

range of options (course and subjects, ie, content) available to their students, while the use of distance education practices has opened options in terms of location. Use of CITs allows for an expansion in the range of modes of delivery. In particular, the use of the Internet opens up a range of new hybrid forms of delivery - part person-to-person, and part distance (through the use of prepared learning resources which might themselves be made available via a course offering's homepage).

More radical versions of 'student centredness' invite students to collaborate in the construction of their own menus - to construct options which are more uniquely theirs. For example, students can be given the opportunity to choose their own learning goals from the course offering within some constraints, rather than have them imposed by the course or subject convenor. Students can be allowed to choose how to be assessed - by an assignment, or by an exam, or both. They might choose to learn via lectures or tutorials or project work, or any combination of these; library or Internet; face-to-face contact, or distance with Internet interaction with staff or other students. These versions presume some degree of self-awareness, in terms of preferred learning styles, personal strengths, and so on, and the capacity for self-direction and self-regulation. This more radical form of student centredness is exemplified by Silverman (1996), who provides a rationale for, and exemplification of its use in a university-level introductory physics course. His underlying rationale is that 'Science as it is taught should more closely resemble science as it is done by professional scientists' (p. 357). This is a disciplined view of student centredness.

However, my intention here is neither to map nor critique notions of student centredness or flexibility. I want to move to discuss issues of relevance to the institutional move to 'eagerly embrace' the new learning and teaching methods which will allow staff to ride the wave of the 'ever expanding technological advance'.

Before I move on, let me briefly explain what I mean by 'flexible learning'. For me it involves both an end and a means. As an end it involves a student-centred approach to education that focuses attention on the learner's control over learning, with the intention of increasing their capacity for exercising responsibility and autonomy in their learning. It recognises the need to ensure that graduates develop the capacities for, and intentions to engage in, lifelong learning. As a means, it involves a convergence of the best of face-to-face and distance education practices with the rapidly evolving capacities of CITs. This is the relatively well known 'delivery' aspect.

But how are the 'flexible learning' practices being developed, and how are they understood in the context of both crisis, and institutional and academic practices? Certainly the digital revolution is happening. Institutions and individuals are already experimenting with the use of CITs, with student-centred approaches to teaching, and with flexible learning (in the sense that I use the term). What can be learnt from these experiments that might help staff catch this CIT wave?

Caution - lone rangers at work

The overwhelming evidence is that the move towards the use of CITs, and student-centred approaches to teaching and flexible learning has been energised and enacted primarily by lone rangers - individual staff members who are energetic, early adopters of innovation, and who are motivated by a desire to innovate and/or improve the quality of their teaching. The CAUT and CUTSD processes have given enormous momentum to those who wanted to engage in innovation. This is an innovation driven approach to the development of new practices. But what are the outcomes?

There are some positives, and some negatives. The positives tend to cluster around the achievement of intentions - improvement in student learning, improvement in retention rates, improvement in the quality of teaching and learning. Some individuals even gained promotion. But the most important outcome is that these lone rangers have laid a foundation for new teaching methods based on the available CITs. In this sense, they have done much to create the potential to catch the CIT wave, and to make it pay off for students in substantive ways. These are extremely important outcomes, and should be celebrated and protected.

But there is also a downside. This approach has tended to produce innovation at the level of particular course offerings, but there has been a lack of institutional support and a failure to institutionalise the outcomes. In fact innovation often occurred in spite of this lack of institutional interest. Because of the lack of integration between their innovation and the institutional practices or the work of their colleagues, innovator-led approaches have tended to produce pockets of isolated activity. Well developed evaluations of such initiatives are rare. Where evaluations have been conducted, and reports written, little notice was or is taken of their findings or recommendations.

The lone rangers approach has emphasised the importance of investing creative energy, but has done little to articulate that investment with the broader institutional context. This is a high cost, low return strategy. And the costs are largely born by the individual lone rangers themselves.

Lone ranger's caution 'don't fence me in'

I would like to suggest that there are several reasons why lone ranging will continue to fail to lead fundamental rethinking of every aspect of the way in which universities provide their services - to reinventing university cultures.

First, lone rangers can't be 'fenced in'. Academics-as-innovators have largely worked as lone rangers - in isolation from their colleagues, and certainly unimpeded by administrators. They have not worked within policy frameworks - they have worked against and/or in spite of them. Their approach is entirely consistent with the tradition of academic autonomy. These are not team players. They are unlikely to welcome any systematic, institutional policy framework. They welcome support, but not direction.

And this tradition of autonomous individualism is not limited to academic workers. In 'new times' we are seeing a trend to the development of relatively autonomous cost-centres within each university. Thus, the survival of each cost centre depends on its financial well-being, considered in isolation from the larger organisation. Thus cost-centres are under pressure to develop strategies for their individual survival, strategies which may militate against collaboration with colleagues who are located in other cost-centres, unless that collaboration has measurable and positive financial implications for both cost-centres. In many instances this means that utilising the services of colleagues who have expertise in areas like instructional design or staff development may be seen as economically unjustifiable for 'academic units', even though the use of their skills may be educationally desirable. Lean and mean can be anti-team!

Lone ranging may be a very effective way of developing innovative practices. However, the challenge is to move beyond innovation at the level of individual subject or organisational element to change at the institutional level - the reinvention of cultures. Until this happens, the very innovative practices that we need to support will be inconsistent with - even at odds with - the broader institutional

practices. Lone ranging is a radically bottom-up approach to innovation, and historical studies of innovation in education, such as those of Goodman (1995), suggest the weight of tradition will not be moved in any profound way by this approach. We need to recognise that the challenge is not limited to the development of innovation, but extends to include the institutionalisation of the outcomes of innovation.

And there are other reasons for moving beyond lone ranging. Lone ranging is also inconsistent with more effective approaches to the development of innovative methods of teaching, which tend to be characterised by collaboration between individuals with complementary expertises. In support of this claim I cite the empirical research of Taylor, Lopez and Quadrelli (1996), who investigated the experiences of staff involved in the move to develop more flexible modes of delivery, including the use of CITs. In the concluding chapter of their report they expressed the belief that:

The move to flexible education is a move to greater collaboration. Flexible modes of delivery will require access to new skills and/or expertise. Those skills and expertise can effectively be accessed through, and developed within, collaborative teamwork. Teaming may change work practices and roles, as new partnerships are forged across what were once disparate domains in the institution. (p. 101; their italics)

Clearly cost/income pressures associated with 'new times' may put the formation of those partnerships at risk unless careful attention is paid to both collaboration and financial management issues. However, the reality is that most university staff are not used to 'putting a dollar value' on their work. Indeed, the expectation that they might do so is likely to alienate many, while the necessity to do so may, for some, exacerbate their fear that the move to flexible learning is primarily motivated by financial rather than educational priorities.

Lone ranging is also, as noted above, practice-focused rather than knowledge-focused. Lone rangers are often interested in achievement of new ways of using CITs, but they are less interested in understanding how those innovations make a difference to student learning. I noted earlier in this paper that well developed evaluations of innovations are rare. This may seem incongruent with the view of universities as knowledge producing communities, but that knowledge building is almost always focused on disciplinary knowledge, rather than pedagogical knowledge. That is, the scholarship of academics tends to be focused on their discipline rather than the teaching of their discipline. But, in my experience, when it comes to introducing new approaches (ie, flexible learning), sceptical questions such as 'does it work', 'what effect does it have on student learning', and the like, have to be answered in ways that are convincing. Staff want to be assured that these practices are understood - that the explanation for why they 'work' involves more than the energy and enthusiasm of the lone rangers who developed them.

### Post-lone ranging

When the West committee speaks of the need to achieve fundamental rethinking of every aspect of the way in which universities provide their services, I interpret them to be speaking of the need to mainstream flexible learning, that is, to extend the level of involvement from the margins, towards the centre of institutional practices.

Extending the 'level of involvement' means involving a 'critical mass' of staff in flexible learning. The term 'critical mass' is, of course, another piece of rhetoric which is in need of clarification. In his address to The Virtual University? Symposium at the University of Melbourne, Iain Morrison, the Assistant Vice-Chancellor Information Technology of that university, quantified this challenge. He suggested

that the lone rangers represented about 10% of the staff. He suggested that another 10% of staff - the early adaptors - would readily follow in the footsteps of these pioneers. His concern was to capture the attention of the additional 10% necessary to achieve 30% participation - his sense of 'critical mass'.

I find Morrison's comments useful for several reasons. First, the concept of 'critical mass' suggests that once you have 30% of staff actively engaged in flexible learning, then the institution would undergo a paradigm change in its educational practices. This quantifies the target. Second, Morrison clarifies the challenge. Institutions cannot make this change on the backs of the lone rangers - they are essential, but not numerically sufficient to achieve 'critical mass'. Institutions have to engage the attention of 'the unconverted', rather than continue to focus on 'the easily or already converted'. This identifies the target.

In my view much of the energy and enthusiasm of those involved in staff development is focused on the first 20% - preaching to the converted and/or easily converted. This is not a waste of time - lone ranging colleagues have told me that they find it extremely useful to meet with like-minded individuals, and to feel valued. Of course this may reflect their marginal status within their own institutional settings - we know that there are few rewards for many lone rangers, especially because it so often involves a conscious decision to forego involvement in research. It seems that they can not convert their interest in innovation into research outcomes that are actually valued. But 'preaching to the converted' is not going to achieve 'critical mass'.

We need to be very careful in extrapolating from the work of lone rangers to the more general academic community. That community is a very broad church - as implied by Morrison's view that as small a proportion as 30% represents an unassailable convergence of belief. To push the congregational metaphor a little further, the very singularity and strength of the faith of some of 'the believers' can be as much an impediment as an asset in any process of 'conversion'. The 'certainty' of their knowledge can heighten the scepticism of the 'the unconverted'.

Any like-minded group tends to develop its own language, based on attitudes, beliefs and values which are largely taken-for-granted (Taylor, 1997a). Where those assumptions are not opened for discussion (and that is not an easy process in universities for a number of reasons), conversion is unlikely. Indeed, in my experience, the unconverted are more likely to have their sense of scepticism converted to cynicism in such settings. Genuine inter-denominational communication needs to occur, and that communication must 'encourage discussion of the local traditions, preferences and prejudices, values and beliefs' not as an aside, but as the point of departure' for any attempt to fundamentally rethink any aspect of the way in which universities provide their services (Taylor, 1997a, p. 126).

If lone ranging is unlikely to provide sufficient 'mass' to achieve fundamental change, then how might we build on the experiences of the lone rangers and 'convert' the necessary proportion of staff to flexible learning? Let me step carefully towards a response to that question.

An alternative - the adaptation track

We have relied too much on lone ranging. That reliance suggests that we have assumed that what we needed was simply more lone rangers. That assumption is unhelpful, and needs to be abandoned. What we need is more people using flexible practices, but they don't have to invent those practices. Thus, I am wanting to distinguish between the necessary practices of innovation, of knowledge construction, and of

adaptation. My argument is that we need to increase the proportion of staff who are adapting practices which have been developed by others, and which are well understood. Importantly, though, I am arguing for both innovation and adaptation - a dual track approach.

Staff face multiple challenges in making a transition to flexible learning. The use of the concepts and tools associated with flexible learning requires that they rethink and refocus their practices. (This is equally true for students.) New skills are required, as are new work attitudes. In the case of flexible learning, skills in the use of information and communication technologies are needed, but changes are also required in many existing expectations and routines - in roles. Thus, changes will not be limited to the delivery of information. In fact those changes which focus on delivery are, in some senses, peripheral.

The implementation of flexible learning requires changes in the roles of staff and students. For this reason, adaptation will involve a process that allows staff to tap into robust practices, rather than to innovate, as a point of departure for this transition. Adaptive development for flexible learning should be staged, and be based on an expectation of evolutionary change. The point of departure for such a process has to be the taken-for-granted attitudes, beliefs and values associated with their existing intentions and practices, and the institutional intentions and practices (Taylor, 1997a). As I have argued elsewhere, reform which adequately addresses the challenges facing universities, must be based on the development of learning communities, and these communities should offer experiences which: engage the pre-existing ideas, orientations, ways of thinking and perspectives of academics; probe the intelligibility, plausibility, and fruitfulness of those knowledge structures; and support the enactment of more intelligible, plausible, and fruitful practices. (Taylor, 1997b)

This view of effective professional development is consistent with research on staff development in other educational settings. For example, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) emphasise that both staff and institutional capacities have to 'develop' in order to respond to the 'era of reform'. They suggest that staff development should 'engage [staff] in concrete tasks ... be grounded in inquiry ... be collaborative ... be connected to and derived from [their] work with their students ... be sustained .. [and] .. be connected to other aspects of [institutional] change' (p. 598).

Kolb (1984) provides a very robust model of a staged process of experiential learning. Paraphrased, that model distinguishes between concrete experience versus abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation versus reflection on experiences. My understanding is that these four stages need to be extended, in this context, to include a focus on sustainability, an issue that is of central importance in the institutionalisation of new practices (Taylor, 1997a).

The process of adaptation would then involve the following five stages.

**Orientation:** where staff are encouraged to consider approaches to teaching which are consistent with University expectations, technological capacities and the educational requirements associated its programs.

**Adoption and adaptation:** where staff adapt their intentions and practices to this new teaching and learning environment, largely on the basis of advice and robust practices adopted from others.

**Evaluation:** where staff reflect on their practices, both as they are being developed, and as they are being implemented, and seek to make judgements about the strengths and weaknesses of those practices.

**Innovation:** where staff seek to re-develop their practices from a basis of increased familiarity with the new environments, and of the strengths and weaknesses of the practices which they initially adopted.

**Institutionalisation:** where staff, particularly those with managerial responsibilities, pay attention to the need to ensure that flexible learning practices are sustained in the medium to long term, and thus become 'traditional'.

Through staged support, based on this meta-view of the adaptive process, the 'unconverted' can be offered a much less demanding experience of the transition - risk can be minimised, anxiety can be decreased. However, the intention is not to generate a narrow, predictable, technicised role for staff. Innovation is expected, but that follows the development of familiarity with and confidence in the new flexible learning environment that they have adopted.

The types of support required at each phase can be predicted. Orientation - opportunities to reflect on pre-existing ideas, orientations, ways of thinking and perspectives; time to probe the intelligibility, plausibility, and fruitfulness of existing and possible practices, to plan as a team, and develop a 'shared vision' of and commitment to their preferred practices.

Adoption and adaptation - nuts-and-bolts training and technical support, including resource development, necessary for the successful implementation of that 'shared vision'.

Evaluation - the introduction of educational theory as a language for discussion of observations, together with discussions which focus on their actual practices and student reactions to them, including consideration of alternative practices.

Innovation - support in the re-design of their adopted practices, repeating the previous three stages on the basis of new familiarity with the flexible learning environment and their personal insights into the possibilities that it offers.

Institutionalisation - (loose) coupling of practices with policy settings, including recognition and reward systems, encouragement for staff to share their experiences with peers, through publication, mentoring and the like.

### Some caveats

Few organisations take the time to institutionalise the innovations, or to transform the learning of individual innovators into organisational learning - to formally construct new knowledge. Indeed, there appears to be a form of institutionalised 'cargo cultism', where only 'outside experts' are seen as having valuable knowledge. Systems need to be put in place that maximise the value to the organisation of the learning of the internal lone rangers. A systematic process of knowledge construction through which robust practices can be identified and documented is a necessary pre-condition for the process I have proposed.

Systems also need to be established to ensure that the technology infrastructure which academics are being encouraged to utilise is available, accessible and maintained. I see this as an issue of aligning individual and institutional expectations and intentions. The reports I have read suggest that when academics do 'move', the size and scope of that movement often come as a surprise to planners.

Getting staff to engage with the adaptation track may require more than well-intentioned invitations. Institutions need to commit to flexible learning - or some equivalent notion. Commitment is likely to lead to engagement if it is an inclusive commitment - all staff are to be involved. Taylor et al (1996) provide evidence that the choice of

'opting out' can be very counterproductive - with staff energy being wasted on arguing 'why I shouldn't be involved (for the time being)'.

Traditional staff development tends to focus on only the first two phases of this five phase model. The success of adaptation depends on the provision of support for staff during all five phases - to continuously link the practices of innovation, knowledge construction, and adaptation.

Given the uncertainty in these 'new times', the last three phases of the five phase model must be supported and repeated on an ongoing basis - the process must remain open, evolutionary. Knowing in uncertain times invites us to constantly review and extend out understandings. We need to avoid inflexible forms of flexible learning.

The strategies outlined here offer opportunities to build on the innovative work of the lone rangers, and offer a less risky track to flexible learning for other members of staff. However, the adaptive path itself requires significant institutional commitment and support. Thus, academic managers who have adopted a 'hands off' approach to managing lone rangers will have to adopt a much more interventionist approach, as indicated by the preceding caveats. Academic managers will have to manage both approaches - innovation and adaptation - simultaneously, and for their mutual benefit.

## Conclusion

From collegiality to digitality, institutional and academic practices are being re-invented, with real short-term effects and uncertain long-term consequences. Many of the strategies being utilised to respond to those demands are themselves innovative, and therefore relatively unproven. Thus we have institutions responding to novel demands with strategies which are also novel. This focus on innovation has, until now, tended to privilege the lone ranger approach while not necessarily rewarding the individual involved. However, that reliance on innovation will not lead to the desired cultural changes.

The issues of uncertainty and crisis cannot be resolved, but we can adopt strategies which maximise the possibility of survival. Lone ranging tends to undervalue the experience and knowledge of others - to be based on poorly informed optimism - and to ignore the need to construct new knowledge carefully. The adaptive strategy places a premium on the experience of the lone rangers, but invites us to think more creatively about how we construct and make systematic use of knowledge based on their experiences. We must recognise the value of robust models of appropriate practices as a resource for individual and institutional survival in uncertain times.

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I recently worked with the staff of a non-education school in my university. I asked why they didn't see any point writing about the innovative practices which they had described to their peers earlier in the day. That sharing had generated enormous interest. The primary reason given was that cv entries had to focus on the research of the discipline. They explained that their next job or promotion would depend on their subject-focused expertise (including their research profile in specific subject areas). The Head of the School (who happens to be a very innovative leader and teacher) agreed, suggesting that staff who indicated an intention

to research their teaching would be counselled against such an intention when they met with him as part of the academic staff review procedure.

Drawing on the empirical work in Taylor et al (1996), I have explored some of these reasons in terms of the concept of the non-literate nature of the educational culture in universities - see Taylor, 1997. I am referring here to a tendency, at least in Australia, to invite (and pay) 'outsiders' to present staff development workshops while 'insiders' with equal (or greater) expertise are ignored.