

MAX LOMAS

A Parable of Talents

Richard Brockinhurst is an imaginary Associate Professor in Textual Politics at the University of the South West. The following story is based on real circumstances, only moderately altered to suit the needs of dramatic interest and legal immunity.

In his office at the end of the Textual Studies corridor, Brockinhurst (being no longer allowed to smoke in the building) was sucking on his biro, trying to put his lecture together, when an email arrived on his desktop:

staff_all@usw.edu.au

In its ongoing quest to maximise efficiencies in physical assets usage, the timetabling of classes will now be centrally controlled. Please contact the new Timetabling Officer, Jacelynn Wong, on extension 6097 with any enquiries.

Thank you,

Briony Jones
Administrative Assistant,
Office of the DVC Teaching and Learning

Brockinhurst gave it a cursory glance and went back to clarifying the idea of discourse for his first-year class.

Later in the year, he found himself, laden with handouts, struggling through fifty students outside his office to reach his accustomed seminar room. This new challenge began to repeat itself more regularly, and he discovered that these were Commerce and Nursing students now timetabled for the larger rooms in the Arts building.

Fine, he could understand that the larger faculties needed more space for tutorials, and he was soon able to block out the enthusiastic conversations outside his office about who was going out with whom and how much alcohol had been consumed on the weekend. Occasionally, he would encourage the overseas students to go into an empty classroom rather than waiting *en masse* for the teacher to arrive.

Then another email arrived:

staff_all@usw.edu.au

As part of continuous improvement in learning facilities, obsolete furniture will be replaced in all large seminar rooms. Timetabling will also now be computerised. Please contact the Educational Resource Manager, Jacelynne Wong, on extension 6097 with any enquiries.

Thank you,

Briony Jones
Process Facilitator,
Office of the DVC (Student Experience)
USW: an eye on the future

The next time Brockinhurst fought his way into his usual seminar room, prepared to have a stimulating discussion with his fifteen third-year students on the moral complexities of Kurt Vonnegut's fiction, he found his circle of comfortable padded seats had been replaced with 30 gray plastic tables in neat rows with two gray plastic chairs behind each. After the class, he wrote:

bjones@usw.edu.au
cc: Dean, Arts

Dear Ms Jones,

I would like to question the current move to 'upgrade' the use and furnishing of classrooms.

I now find it almost impossible at times to reach my classes because of student crowding in the corridors of the Arts building. This also occasions constant noise outside staff offices, making concentration on preparing lectures and research difficult.

Moreover, with the tyranny of scientific models of learning, my usual classrooms are now regimented into rows of 'sit-up-and-beg' desks and chairs. This represents not only an outmoded concept of education as top-down transmission of facts (quite at odds with mission statement declarations of 'student-centred learning'), but militates against the kind of free-flowing discussion in which humanities learning consists.

I note that no one was consulted about these changes, and request that some rooms at least be retained for appropriately 'casual' collegial dialogue in humanities seminars.

Yours sincerely,
A/Prof Richard Brockinhurst,
Textual Politics, Arts

He received two replies:

brock@usw.edu.au

Dear A/Prof Brockinhurst,

Thanks you for your comments on our recently improved system of student management. I have referred them to our Executive Officer, Educational Resource Management.

We value staff feedback as part of our process of continual learning enhancement and I am sure your thoughts will be taken on board.

Sincerely,
Briony

Briony Jones
Process Facilitator,
Office of the DVC (Student Experience)
USW: an eye on the future

and

brock@usw.edu.au

Dear Rich,

Yes, it is unfortunate that some of these changes have occurred. However, we need to remember that the larger faculties bring in the dollars that keep us all afloat, and Arts has to be seen to be a good 'corporate citizen' to maintain collective goodwill and insulate us against more inroads from the other side of campus.

Yours,
Bill

Prof William Debois,
Dean, Faculty of Arts

Two weeks before the second session, a memo went around to check the new on-line timetable for any inconsistencies. Brockinhurst found the website after several attempts (it came up as 'subject timetables'; 'timetable' only produced a few calendar dates for each session and graduation). As he read, he fidgeted, then swore, then whacked the desk. Fuming, he searched for the timetable officer's email address, and after trawling a half-dozen likely labels discovered this position was now called 'Director, Learning Deployment'. Having snorted derisively, he made himself a cup of strong tea, then wrote:

jace@usw.edu.au
cc. Dean, Arts
ccc. VC

Dear Ms Wong,

May I point out that the new improved automated timetabling system has me lecturing in Text 101 at the same time as I tutor a class in that subject? It also has Contemporary Australian Novel 200 at the same time as Australian Theatre 200. I do not teach both of these, but most students commonly take both subjects as part of their major, so this will effectively halve classes and prolong candidature unless remedied.

You have me down to teach Text 101 in the Arts building 9 to 10 and then Film 101 immediately after in the Engineering building. I cannot fathom the 'efficiency' of walking from one end of campus to the other while Engineering students travel in the opposite direction to rooms by my office in Arts. It wastes a lot of time (and is a major inconvenience in wet weather). Moreover, though it no doubt cannot be programmed into your

new system, this arrangement destroys any sense of *esprit de corps*: students feel no sense of belonging and litter rooms; staff cannot put up displays and create an atmosphere of discipline-specific learning. It all reduces higher education to a supermarket of faceless consumerism!

My Indian Fiction 300 class is down for Friday at 4.30. Do you really think that students will turn up at such a time? Or is there a plot to phase out small specialist subjects?

Yours disaffectedly,
Richard Brockinhurst
A/Prof Textual Politics

His replies were:

Dear Richard,

Thank you for your comments on our timetabling system. There are some teething problems and we will do our best to sort out the clashes you mention.

We have to prioritise larger classes and those requiring specialist AV technology. Unfortunately no one can 'own' university spaces any more, and Finance advises that we need to do more to ensure full use of our physical assets across each day. This means that some people will not always get what they have been used to.

Please note that the new arrangements meet with the approval of the Healthy Faculty policy initiative.

Yours,
Jacelynnne

Jacelynnne Wong,
Director, Learning Deployment
USW: Progressing the Future

Rich,

Do go easy on our admin lot. They're trying their best.

The VC assures me that Arts will retain full use of the central wing for its own specialist needs.

Bill

Prof William Debois,
Dean, Faculty of Arts

Dear Prof Brockinhurst,
We value your opinion. There is now a special site for lodging your comments. Please go to the 'Feedback' button on the Staff Intranet via your faculty webpages.
Yours faithfully,
Olga Schmek
Administrative Assistant,
Vice Chancellor's Suite

The next year, in the middle of January, Brockinhurst happened to open his email and found:

Hi Dick,
As you will know the universities mission to achieve excellence in client service is upgrading the Arts building. To remove corridor crowding student lounges have been actioned by our university architect. These will brighten our old building and will have a small kitchen for general use.
Your office is scheduled for demolition over the next few weeks to avoid disruption in session time. Student help has been assigned to move your books, so don't worry.
Bro

Brody Tomovic, B.Comm.
Faculty Procedures Officer
Faculty of Arts
USW: Progress the Future

Brockinhurst nearly had a stroke on the spot. He knew there were plans for remodelling some of the building, and a colleague had been slated to move offices because of this. No one had mentioned that his room was in the plan. He wrote:

bro@usw.edu.au
cc. Dean, Arts

Dear Brody,

This is the first I have heard of a move, and it is fortunate I happened to discover your email. Why I could not have been warned of this earlier, I do not know!

I really don't want students moving my library. My books are in a sequence most suited to my teaching and research needs and it will only mean more wasted time having to reorganise them if they are boxed up by others. I shall come in over the weekend and dismantle my shelving and move the lot myself.

I have to say that this is a major inconvenience as I am due to present a paper at the annual conference of my association end of next week. Tell me what room I am to move into.

And what about those Summer Session classes we now have to offer? How will all the inevitable building noise make them possible?

And can someone please tell university marketing that 'progress' is a noun!!

By the way, no one calls me Dick.

Richard

A/Prof Richard Brockinhurst
Textual Politics, Arts

In reply:

Dear Rick,

No worries. Sorry about the inconvenience. Architect changed plans; there was a beam in the way or something.

Happy to help any way we can. You'll move to Arts1036. But you can't use the shelving you have. OH&S declared it unsafe last session and we have to use the new free standing wooden book cases.

Cheers,

Bro

To which:

Dear Brody,

You have to be kidding! I know Professor Millford was buried in an avalanche of folders when he changed offices, but no shelves were built to hold five ton of paper! I should point out that the metal strip system I have goes floor to ceiling and holds a lot more books than the new wooden cases do (and they are not even anchored to the wall so how are they safer?). There is no way 1036 will hold enough shelves to accommodate my library.

I have to say I resent being put in this position. How is one expected to do any research when the summer break is taken up with this sort of thing?

Richard

Followed by:

Hi Rick,

Sorry, but we're bound by OH&S and can't afford litigation from staff or students. Maybe you could keep some of your books at home. There's a regulation limit of four cases per standard office.

Happy to lend a hand with your move if you need extra help.

Bro

This prompted an email escalation:

dean_arts@usw.edu.au

Dear Dean,

I really must protest at the stupidity of what is going on. There was no warning that I should move offices and some up-jumped Commerce student is now telling me to do without half my professional library. I teach literature, dammit: that means books. If the faculty cannot accommodate my library, then I am not only placed at personal disadvantage but wonder whether there is any commitment to the humanities left in this university.

I did expect some leadership from you as Dean to resist this ridiculous atomising of our teaching into some consumerist smorgasbord for part-time baristas in which our 'clients' can now rest on cushions and make cups of tea while our capacity to do our job is whittled away. But then, the brilliance of the university machine is that while emulating corporate management it elevates reasonable teachers into workloads managers and half-way decent researchers with limited people skills into personnel managers and policy wallahs. Engineers get some training for project management at least – that's why they all get to be Vice Chancellors: humanities types struggle on as best they can and get screwed.

Sorry to dump this on you, but I am feeling somewhat persecuted. And by the way, at the moment, you have the highest-paid hand trolley operator in the university.

Richard

A/Prof Richard Brockinhurst
Textual Politics, Arts

For this, he received:

brock@usw.edu.au

Dear Richard,

I'm afraid you are taking this far too personally. The university is building its reputation not only through scholars such as yourself, but also by increasing its market appeal to a larger slice of student intake in competition with our larger rivals. This is necessary for our survival, and sacrifices must be made to ensure our ongoing viability as a faculty. Do restrain yourself in relation to our support staff; they do the best they can and I should remind you of university policy about avoiding language that might give offense.

I have monitored your comments over the last year and you are obviously finding it difficult to accept change. Change, however, is the only constant in our constantly changing tertiary sector. Your PKIs are quite acceptable, so you should not feel challenged if there is minor disruption to this year's summer break. As for books, we all have to comply with OH&R regulations

whether we like it or not. Perhaps your excess could find a spot in the Faculty store-room, to which you would have access.

I take your point about the idiosyncratic nature of the university administrative system, but feel obliged to point out that I did have considerable success with moving staff from the old Philosophy Department to programs of Bio-ethics and Computer Logic, and that my last book was reviewed as a 'triumph', so some of us do manage to keep more than one ball in the air at once. I notice that there are only a few years remaining to you before the usual retirement age; perhaps we could have a chat about that some time.

Best wishes,

Bill

With his Line Manager's comments ringing in his ears, Brockinhurst muttered darkly about a Cootawindra *Chronicle* review that spoke of "a triumph of obfuscation over common sense", kicked the pile of books in the centre of his office, and stormed off to the university bar – which was closed for the summer break. His union was also on holiday when he phoned. A general email to his colleagues summing up the broad issues he'd been raising was deemed inappropriate by the Faculty Officer and suppressed.

In the end, Brockinhurst got on with his conference paper, caught pneumonia between Arts and Engineering during the next semester, and started calculating how much superannuation he'd accrued. Textual Politics was described in *The Australian* as another example of extremist left-wing academic trendiness, and in a faculty curriculum reform was phased out as being somewhat past its prime and inconvenient in terms of the new university mission statement. USW now aimed to 'maximise our international outreach with sensitivity to the norms of all cultures and minority stakeholders in client-centred learnings'. A new major in media design was substituted.