Teaching “The Good Stuff”
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This paper will discuss the method and content of the teaching of industrial relations (in the words of a local politician, ‘the good stuff’) and employment relations courses at Central Queensland University. The paper will discuss how the teaching and the content of these courses have changed over time, in response to the changing nature of the labour market and the public policy debate in Australia and overseas. It will provide a rationale for the teaching of courses that are underpinned by a liberal pluralist view of the world.

Furthermore, it will provide a rationale for the teaching of courses that analyse the public policy issues that dominate the development of systems of employment relations in a number of European, Asian, Pacific and North American countries. The paper will discuss the challenges that arise from the teaching of such courses to students who have a limited understanding and experience of the intricacies of a system of employment relations in Australia, as well as in other countries. Finally, the paper will consider the lessons that can be learned with respect to the teaching of such courses. These lessons will be evaluated within the context of the challenges presented by the diversity of the student population, and the necessity to service contemporary cohorts with complementary and diverse teaching and learning practices.

This paper discusses the teaching of industrial relations at Central Queensland University (CQU). The title of the paper derives from a conversation between the author and a local parliamentarian with an interest in such matters. It was the view of the politician that industrial relations was ‘the good stuff’ and that the author should continue to teach it. When the author was appointed as a lecturer in industrial relations in July 1982, not much effort needed to be devoted to extolling the virtues of teaching and learning this ‘good stuff’.

In 1982, the teaching of industrial relations was a relatively straightforward matter of teaching local students in traditional tertiary education lecturing and tutoring arrangements in class rooms located on the Rockhampton campus of the then Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education. These students could communicate with the lecturer directly at a mutually convenient time. Other students were taught via printed materials (both lecture notes and additional readings to complement the textbook) that were posted to them. These students communicated with the lecturer principally by means of telephone, and sometimes in tutorial groups accessed by means of telephone conferencing. Two decades later, very few students are taught in the lecture theatres and the tutorial rooms of the Rockhampton campus of CQU. The majority of students are taught at other campuses of the University, both within Australia and overseas, as well as by the traditional distance education mode of teaching. A large percentage of these students were neither born in Australia, nor speak English as their first language. Furthermore, a large part of the administration of the courses in industrial relations is conducted by electronic mail, as is an increasing amount of student contact (Stewart 2001).

The institutional context

The re-election of the conservative federal government in 2004 has ensured that the issue of the reform and future direction of
higher education remains very much at the forefront of the political debate in Australia (Dodd 2004). The respective merits of this debate need not concern us in this paper. However, the idea that higher education is important to the future of this country; that the sources for funding higher education should be more diverse than merely relying on the government; and that dramatic and quite possibly irreversible changes have occurred within this sector since 1988, is relevant to the paper (Nelson 2002). Prominent amongst the issues that either are impacting, or will impact on the future of the sector are matters of ‘teaching-only universities’, ‘the commercial side of higher education’, as well as of course, the reform of industrial relations practices and working arrangements (Dodd 2004). In these circumstances, it is not surprising that a comparatively recent Commonwealth Government paper (Nelson 2002: 8) argued that; ‘The last decade and a half has radically transformed higher education in Australia’ (Nelson 2002: 8).

Within this context of change and reform within the higher education sector, one newspaper analysis of the impact of federal government legislation on universities placed Central Queensland University in the category of ‘new-generation universities’ (The Australian 2003). Certainly, CQU has adapted well to the changed higher education environment that has been wrought by this radical transformation. Currently, it has eleven ‘delivery sites’ and campuses situated within Australia, with another four such sites located in other countries. Statistically in 2003, the University employed approximately 1500 employees and enrolled 21,351 students. The 21,351 students can be broken down into two distinct groups, 8,915 international and 12,436 Australian students. Courses can be studied at regional campuses such as Gladstone, Mackay, Emerald and Bundaberg, as well as on the main Rockhampton campus. They can also be studied at international campuses situated in Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney and the Gold Coast, as well as at overseas operations located in Malaysia, Fiji, Singapore and Hong Kong (CQU 2004a).

The University can service its student population by means of both traditional and more advanced technological methods. The traditional method of lecturing in front of a class is still used, but lectures can now be beamed ‘live’ from the main lecture theatre to other lecture theatres on other campuses as part of an Interactive System-Wide Learning (ISL) network. Similarly, courses can still be delivered by paper, but they can also be delivered on-line, via computer access. Library resources can still be accessed by the traditional methods of borrowing and research, or they can be accessed electronically in an increasing number of circumstances (CQU 2003).

This environment automatically ensures that any course will present challenges for a lecturer. Given that students are making a greater financial contribution in the modern era than they were required to do at least from 1974 to 1987 (when higher education was designated as ‘free’), it is understandable that an argument can be made that they have become ‘more demanding as consumers’ (Nelson 2002: 6-8). Equally, it is perfectly understandable that the drive for access to greater levels of non-government funding has led to the establishment of more campuses, a wider variety of modes of delivery of lecturing material, and a more diverse student cohort than existed in 1982. Indeed, the CQU student cohort presently includes students from Malaysia, Taiwan, India, China, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Nepal, Suriname, Fiji, Tuvalu, Bangladesh, Uganda, Indonesia, the Maldives, Singapore, Madagascar, England, and Oman (CQU 2004a). This situation challenges lecturers in terms of coping with language difficulties, cultural differences, technology, and the perennial organisational struggle for resources.

Kenneth Hawkins and Trevor Bransgrove (1998: 65-66) identified a number of issues that concerned international students who were studying in Australia in the 1990s. These included; the quality and
variety of food, personal isolation, style of clothing, access to computing services, access to academic services, access to library facilities, availability of transport and part-time employment, colours, toilet facilities, unsuitable contact times, the arrangement of seating, and the local climate. There were also issues relating to the attitude of certain members of staff and general concerns respecting discrimination and racism. Of course and quite obviously, there were many factors that attracted such students to study in Australia. For the purposes of this paper however, there are certainly a number of challenges to be met with respect to the teaching of international students at Australian universities.

Nonetheless, probably the greatest challenge that is posed is the difficulty, which arises from teaching students for whom English (the language of instruction) is not their mother tongue. In such circumstances, there are a number of impediments to clear and precise lecturer to student communication and therefore instruction, not the least of which is the broad question of the misinterpretation of the communication and instruction. Significantly, in this respect the difficulty lies less with the understanding of the spoken English and more with the subtleties inherent within its delivery. For example, ‘The Australian habit of injecting irony into normal conversation is something that creates problems in this regard’. Lecturers can further impede the communication process by failing to provide specific instruction to students, by the use of Australian jargon in their speaking, as well as by their speed of speaking. Furthermore, these verbal problems are compounded by issues such as the difficulty in meeting with lecturers at times that are convenient to the student, and by lecturers declining to discuss certain academic issues that are raised by their international students. For those lecturers who prefer verbal interaction and dialogue in their classes, particularly tutorials, there is the additional difficulty of enticing students to speak, who possess a cultural background that is not characterised by public robustness of debate and individual assertiveness and participation in such debates and discussions (Hawkins & Bransgrove 1998: 66-67).

Kenneth Hawkins and Trevor Bransgrove (1998: 67) provide a good summary of the position regarding the use of English as the language of instruction in the class room:

Every language offers its speakers a ready-made interpretation of the world that gives rise to idiosyncratic styles of thought influenced by an entire cultural history. With this in mind, it becomes apparent that the idiosyncratic style of English, with its origins in Greek language and Western philosophy, makes it neither a better nor worse system – but it does make it different.

One should be careful not to assume that the problems of teaching industrial relations in the modern era are confined to international students. Students from all backgrounds experience difficulties in industrial relations courses. Indeed, in 1982 a reasonable number of students would have been familiar with at least certain aspects of the content and terminology of the course. By 2004, very few students (quite irrespective of their background) at the commencement of the course possess any obvious affinity with the material that they are required to study.

The course context

There are three main and separate industrial relations courses taught at both undergraduate and postgraduate level as a part of the management and the human resources management streams in the Faculty of Business and Law at Central Queensland University. A fourth course is best characterised as an associate diploma unit that is used to service students in other Faculties. An examination constitutes the major part of the assessment in three of these four courses and the examination is of three hours.
duration in the two main courses. Students either have, or can obtain access to printed material in all four courses. In the main large undergraduate course, students can also access via the web, power point lecturing slides. In 2004, the lecturing of this course (for the first time) involved ISL connections with other campuses.

These courses do not involve the use of all the web-based teaching tools that are available, but in these more competitive times they are being integrated into the on-line programmes offered by CQU. Indeed, the use of web-based power point slides has greatly enhanced the teaching of the main course that is offered in the relevant programmes. This has been achieved because these slides provide a fine summary of the main points to students, as well as to the staff who lecture this particular course at other campuses. They ensure that the same essential information is available to all staff and students across all campuses and all modes of study. Of course, the provision of a fair minimum standard of information to the students can only assist in the moderation and marking of assignments and examination papers across these campuses and modes of study.

Mastery of the Interactive System-Wide Learning (ISL) network requires patience and concentration and adds to the challenges facing lecturers in a potentially global class room as they are required to juggle human and technological interactions and communications across campuses. With respect to what three Central Queensland University researchers (Kehoe, Tennant & Windeknecht 2004) have designated as ‘the challenge of flexible and non-traditional learning and teaching methods’, it is important to note that, unsurprisingly, there is no ‘one best way’ to achieve ‘best practice’ outcomes in the contemporary university learning environment. Research by Kehoe, Tennant & Windeknecht (2004: 62) reveals ‘that investing too much time and resources into these methods to the detriment of others may in fact be counterproductive’. Such ‘methods should be viewed as complementary to traditional forms of teaching’. The integration of flexible, traditional and non-traditional teaching practices constitutes a further challenge to academics lecturing industrial relations in a university with multiple campuses across a number of countries and regions.

The vast majority of students are apprehensive about their capacity to meet the assessment requirements of industrial and employment relations courses, particularly if that assessment includes an examination. Part of this apprehension relates to the time pressures imposed on students by the necessity for them to work in order to meet their financial obligations (Marshall 2003). Part of it is related to a lack of experience of writing by hand under examination conditions. The bulk of this apprehension arises from the fear of failure, particularly in the course that undergraduate human resources management students have to pass (CQU 2004b).

At first glance, it is not surprising that students would be apprehensive about passing a course that is different (in its conception and content, as well as in the philosophy that underpins it) to the vast majority of the subjects that they will have studied within the Faculty of Business and Law. It is a reading and comprehension course, which discusses broader questions respecting public policy matters in Australia and in other countries. Of course, the discussion of political and philosophical matters unsettles some students, who are for a variety of reasons reluctant to express a personal opinion on such matters. What is more disturbing to many students is the ambiguity inherent in industrial relations. There are no correct or incorrect answers, but there are differing interpretations and lines of inquiry, as well as difficult and complex questions with which to grapple.

Furthermore, the course is based on certain pluralist philosophical understandings, such as for example that conflict and tensions in employment relationships are a normal, natural and inherent part of working life. The course also accepts and promulgates a role for
collective bargaining and trade unions in contemporary workplaces and societies, particularly given the power imbalances that pervade the employment relationship. Unions, collective bargaining and industrial conflict are not the staple fare of management and human resources management courses in the modern era. Indeed, the subject matter of industrial relations has had to be broadened to encompass more informed discussion of consensual as well as individual and non-union relationships in labour markets, which have significant numbers of casual and part-time employees in them. Similarly, the influence of management strategy; the impact of human resource management; the changing nature of the labour market; and the trend towards determining working arrangements and the terms and conditions of employment at the enterprise level, receive more attention in the current textbooks than previously would have been the case (Deery, Plowman, Walsh & Brown 2001). Finally, in order to enhance the marketability of courses, course titles have been changed from ‘industrial relations’ to ‘employment relations’. This has occurred in two of the four courses taught at CQU.

In their study of international students, Kenneth Hawkins and Trevor Bransgrove (1998: 68-70) recommend that courses be designed to accommodate many different cultural perspectives in their lecturing material. Indeed, where practical they should be non-culturally specific and thereby as ‘planetary portable’ as possible. Furthermore, the English language skills of such students should be enhanced by the inclusion of oral presentations and debates in the courses. In addition, their English language skills would be assisted by the taping of lectures, as well as by the provision of as much printed material (and therefore readable at a slower than spoken pace) as possible. Overall, students should have their own specific cultural perspective moderated by exposure to other comparative perspectives. Certainly, one of the defining changes that have occurred with respect to the teaching of industrial relations at Central Queensland University has been the introduction of one comparative course at the undergraduate level, and one comparative course at the postgraduate level. In addition, the two Australian industrial relations courses are no longer taught from a base level hypothesis that this system is inherently and fundamentally unique. The view that all systems of employment relations face similar global product and labour market competitive pressures, but respond to them in their own way in keeping with their own historical and societal traditions (Bamber, Lansbury & Wailes 2004a), also informs the lecturing material.

**Change and continuity**

In his foreword to an earlier Commonwealth Government report regarding the future of higher education in Australia, Roderick West (DEETYA 1998: 11) argued that:

> The challenge for our universities is to preserve the unique nature of university life and at the same time to conduct their affairs as large, complex organisations in a diverse, competitive and uncertain world. But quality, and not profit, must be the key goal. Universities must maintain their paradoxical role of being creatures of their culture and a locus for revolution at the same time.

It is important that university students are exposed intellectually to the question of how best to regulate employment relations. A one-time prominent manager in this country argued persuasively almost a decade ago that, ‘The best graduates are those who have received a very good training in the fundamentals of university, the theoretical side, the philosophical side of the subject matter; the understanding that will last a long time irrespective of changes in technology or changes in the market place’ (Ellis, quoted in Healy 1996).

As far as courses in industrial relations and employment relations at Central Queensland University are concerned, the
nomenclature, emphasis and topics may have changed since 1982, but the attempt to provide for students a different theoretical perspective and understanding of these matters has not changed. In the words of three prominent academics in this field of study:

The most successful employment relations systems will be those that preserve a degree of equity between managers and workers, and develop their human resources. Successful systems will also prove to be most adaptable to external challenges, not least in terms of enhancing their efficiency and effectiveness (Bamber, Lansbury & Wailes 2004b: 352).

Conclusion

Why is it that the teaching of industrial relations at Central Queensland University has surmounted the challenge of academic survival and programme relevance, which was not by any means guaranteed in the past, as indeed it is not by any means guaranteed in the future? In part the answer must be due to the care and attention that its lecturers and tutors have lavished on it down through the years. In recent years, it is not unknown for students to comment that when they decided to study one of these courses, they could see neither its relevance nor its utility. However, as the course progressed they had come to appreciate its story and its content. Of course, part of this ‘care and attention’ is maintaining the political relevance of teaching such courses in human resources management programmes, management schools and business departments and faculties, in times when the pressures on academics and courses to ‘deliver outcomes’ is increasing.

Industrial relations courses will continue to be taught at CQU for only as long as their lecturers and tutors are prepared to nurture them and maintain their relevance, whilst simultaneously retaining their professional enthusiasm for them in the face of the challenges of the modern classroom. Since 1982, many things have changed with respect to the teaching of industrial relations at Central Queensland University, but one thing has not changed; someone has to care about teaching ‘the good stuff’.

References


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