Quote Of The Month 1

“...Incredulous revulsion and hysterical laughter are useless against the march of the morons, among whose number are the enemies within: the toadyng vice-chancellor straining for a knighthood, the administrator “quislings’ and the managerialist un-dead, presently dancing on spread sheets, before arranging redundancies for junior staff paid a sixth of their own salaries. These creatures must be our immediate targets’.

Fred Inglis, Times Higher Education, 6 October 2011
TWO AWARDS FOR NICK CLEGG

Certainly Nick Clegg must win an award as the most prescient of British politicians. He was a lonely figure in April 2010 when he warned that a hardline rightwing government, without a popular mandate, making savage cuts to the public sector would provoke riots. How right he was. He also gets an award as the least prescient politician for not foreseeing that he would be Deputy Prime Minister in that government.

CAMPAIGN ROUNDUP

Pensions:

Lobby Of Parliament 26th October:

On the 26th October at least one representative from every school, FE and HE college institution in the country will converge on the Houses Of parliament to Lobby their MP. UCU@BSU are sending Communications Officer, Chris Jury.

We have emailed Jacob Rees-Mogg, the Conservative MP for North East Somerset, the constituency in which BSU sits geographically, to ask for a meeting on the day and as yet have received no reply! If you’d like to email Mr Rees-Mogg you can do so here

More details at Decent Pensions

National Day Of Action 30th November:

The TUC have announced a National Day of Action on the 30th November on the issue of public service pensions.

The UCU strike ballot is still ‘live’ and UCU will be striking on the 30th.

It is highly likely that an array of the most important trade unions will be striking and demonstrating with us. GMB, PCS, Unite, Unison, NUT, NAHT and ATL all highly likely to vote for the strike.

This is a battle that is winnable and we urge all UCU members at BSU to strike on the 30th and join the picket lines to demonstrate our solidarity with all the victims of the Great Pension heist across the UK.

Redundancy:

At the moment, the UCU branch is engaged in negotiating an agreement that seeks, first of all, to avoid redundancy, and as a last resort to provide a generous voluntary scheme that will enable us to avoid compulsion. It is our belief that to have this in place will be good for staff morale and that good staff morale will be good for Bath Spa.
Negotiations are currently proceeding with good will on both sides and we are hopeful that an agreement on a generous redundancy avoidance package will be agreed before the end of 2011.

**Workload:**

Bath Spa University and BSUU@BSU branch are still in official dispute over the issue of academic workload. The dispute arose in 2009/10 over the restructuring of the modular scheme, which, UCU argued, failed to take into account the increased workload that the restructuring would inevitably bring about.

Indeed, the BSU management team explicitly excluded academic workload as a topic of discussion in the staff ‘consultations’ on the restructuring. i.e. they refused to even discuss it despite significant staff concerns.

In an effort to move towards a resolution of the dispute, the UCU@BSU branch committee have issued a discussion document. It is the intention of this document to help develop a more transparent, consistent, equitable and efficient model of workload allocation for the institution and bring the on-going dispute to a satisfactory end.

You can download the document [here](#).

Your comments, thoughts and suggestions should be emailed to [ucu@bathspa.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@bathspa.ac.uk)

**Academic Freedom & Collegiality:**

Our new VC has spoken publicly about her desire to position BSU as a provider of high-quality, research-led, US style Liberal Arts College education. This idea will be attractive to many staff at BSU but raises many issues about the lack of academic freedom and collegiality at BSU. Can the current regime deliver the VC’s aims. UCU@BSU has prepared a discussion document that aims to start a discussion around these potentially contentious issues. The document can be downloaded from [here](#).

Your comments, thoughts and suggestions should be emailed to [ucu@bathspa.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@bathspa.ac.uk)

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**FAIRNESS FACT NO 264**

While our ‘gold-plated’ pensions are coming under savage attack, it is reassuring to know that the average executive at the top 100 British companies still retires at 60 with an annual pension of £224,000. It is also extremely encouraging to note that while the great majority of people are experiencing a fall in their living standards, these individuals are thankfully seeing their pay and benefits soar. According to the High Pay Commission the average pay of the chief executive of the top 100 British companies increased from a miserly £3.09 million to more respectable £4.45 million in 2010. Thank heavens it is not all doom and gloom. As George Osborne always says: We are all in it together, Ho! Ho! Ho!

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Continued.….
ONLINE MARKING

Colleagues will remember the poll that the union conducted regarding compulsory online marking and online feedback. At the time of writing management have given assurances that no attempt will be made to introduce this but this is not reflected in UCU member’s experiences within individual Schools. There is a fear that some schools are trying to introduce compulsion either piecemeal or by stealth.

In the two articles below UCU members, Brian Griffin and Joe Bennett give two opposing perspectives on the controversy.

We hope these articles will stimulate a debate within UCU, so if you feel strongly about either or both articles please send your comments to ucu@bathspa.ac.uk

If there are enough responses we will publish a Special Edition of the Newsletter before Christmas.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

E-feedback for students – a personal view

By Joe Bennett. Head Of School Of Music & Performing Arts

There’s an interesting and, I suspect, common debate going on at Bath Spa University at the moment, regarding the pros and cons of providing online feedback to students for their written work. The arguments on both sides are easy enough to summarise. Those in favour cite timeliness of feedback, support for disabilities, higher uptake rate, staff time efficiency, student expectation, lower carbon footprint, legibility of feedback, increased word count and accessibility of feedback. Those against cite difficulty with the software interface, the learning curve required by staff to use it, physical issues using computers and displays, and the ‘academic freedom’ of staff to defend pre-Internet working practices (of paper-based marking). Considering that this article is originally being written for a blog site (bathspaweb2.edublogs.org) about the benefits of e-learning, it’s no secret that I consider that the pros outweigh the cons. But my reasoning is not based on tech-evangelism – rather, it is because, like all of us, I have devoted a large part of my professional life to ensuring that my students have the best learning experience possible, and experience has shown me that online marking enables students to receive feedback that is more timely, relevant, extensive and clear than the equivalent paper-based method. Does this require academics to learn new skills? Certainly. Can it improve the student learning experience? I believe so.

This is not to say that all assessment feedback is better online. Feedback can and should take many forms; in my own formative and summative assessment I use face-to-face tutorials, group seminars and peer assessment, all using verbal protocols that would have been familiar to any 19th-century academic.
But I also use Skype, Google talk, pdf annotations, Jing, Camtasia, Zotero, YouTube, emailed MP3s, Turnitin, Minerva, and various blogs, sites and wikis. In each case the feedback tool, whether analogue or digital, is selected with the goal of giving students the clearest and most helpful feedback to support their learning. I personally abandoned paper feedback in 2003, initially for reasons of timeliness (emailing feedback to students was simply quicker and easier) and later for reasons of increased pedagogical benefit.

Let’s start with a scenario that will be familiar to anyone who’s ever marked a pile of paper essays. We dutifully annotate every paragraph, highlighting well known spelling/grammar errors such as possessive its, splice commas and providing notes to help students to improve academic citations. [This article is only being distributed electronically. If it were in paper form, the three hyperlinks in the previous sentence directing the reader to additional online learning resources would be unavailable]. At the end of a long, gruelling day (or week, or month!) of marking, we have a large pile of paper on our desks. We then pass these marked up essays back to the students – often some months later if it was a summer submission – or leave them in an office for collection. Sometimes students collect work and read the feedback, and sometimes they don’t. You only have to prowl the corridors of any building on any campus to find box files containing marked work that students have not collected. I know of one colleague who, at the end of a full marking/handback cycle, was left with 75% of the papers not collected by returning students, who had ‘moved on’, or for whatever personal reasons had no interest in reading the feedback. He was heartbroken – all his detailed and diligent work was wasted because the very people he was trying to help were refusing to engage with his preferred method of communicating.

Pedagogical research studies show that feedback is a vital part of the student learning experience, but the UK National Student Satisfaction Survey results consistently demonstrate that a large proportion of students are unhappy with the ‘frequency, timing and method’ (Holmes and Papageorgiou, 2009) of the feedback they receive from tutors. Online feedback is usually received more quickly by students, because they can read it without coming to the campus, or waiting until staff are available to return it. It can be accessed at a convenient time, and from anywhere, thus supporting distance learners, students with mobility issues, and students with families or day jobs. And good quality online feedback can provide opportunities for additional learning beyond the limitations of paper marginalia. If a student’s essay fails to reference important academic literature in the field of study, our feedback can contain hyperlinks to further reading. If the essay makes a basic error of grammar, style or citation, we can provide hyperlinks to websites and articles that will enable the student to improve these areas for next time. I have a 500-word ‘rubric’ set up on Turnitin’s Grademark facility so that every time students misuse splice commas I can drag and drop a detailed explanation of how they can avoid making this error in future.
The other consideration is the demographic of our current and future learners. Over 90% of BSU students own their own laptop, and 100% have on-campus web access. Many primary schools now use a VLE for key stage 2, and most secondary schools provide online feedback of some sort through VLEs, including Moodle. Teachers throughout key stage 2 and 3 are setting up their own blog sites to support student learning and encourage online interaction. When these children become young adults and enter HE, we can speculate that an 18-year-old first year undertaking our assignments would be somewhat bemused - perhaps even unimpressed – to receive an A4 printout with handwritten comments, three months after hand-in.

But good quality e-feedback, just like good quality teaching, takes training, skills and experience to deliver. And 'late adopters' (Rogers, 1963) are often left understandably confused by the array of options and the difficulties of getting started. The staff learning curve for a lot of e-learning tools – and I include our own Blackboard/Minerva solution – is far steeper than it should be. As academics we’re thrown in at the deep end with these tools, and the designers of the tools are often so preoccupied with adding features that usability suffers. And although we have some excellent staff training support in our universities, the interfaces should not be as difficult as they are to operate. No-one asks for training using Facebook or Google, because these companies have poured $millions into improving usability. Setting up a Turnitin assignment in the Grade Centre is unreasonably fiddly and complicated. This poor usability creates an apartheid between early and late adopters, with the risk that only the former may provide e-feedback to students. The result is that students become disgruntled that they do not get the same quality of feedback from all staff.

The challenges of software usability and staff IT literacy are very real barriers to students receiving good quality feedback. As assessors, there are two directions we can choose. If we consider that the benefits (to our students) are worth the effort, we’ll forge ahead and confront our difficulties as learners of a new ‘language’, even if the online tool is a bit clunky and difficult. If the learning curve is too great for us, we will resist, and will find a way to intellectualise disengagement – ‘academic freedom to mark however I like’, ‘I like the tangible feel of paper’, ‘I get RSI sitting at a computer’, ‘it’s worked for me for 20 years’ etc.

Let’s look at these arguments one by one. I suggest that the term ‘academic freedom’ may be being misused here. Our own UCU definition of the term covers five areas, all of which relate to the intellectual concept of academic freedom (and all of which I would defend as vehemently as the next colleague). None of them (nor any of the academic literature) refer to the freedom to choose the administrative method by which written feedback is delivered.

The ‘tangible feel of paper’ is a personal preference that doesn’t provide an observable student benefit, and in any case, staff and students can print online materials if they need to. As regards the ‘RSI argument’, physical issues connected with computer usage must of course be treated seriously by academics and organisations, and anyone with a disability of any sort should – and is – supported in their role.
Recently, a member of my team who suffered from back problems told me he was unable to sit at a workstation to deliver online marking, and needed support and advice. We provided him with a portable MP3 recorder and a short training course in how to upload audio files to the VLE. His students received online verbal feedback that was far more extensive than the paper based equivalent, and they made very positive comments about this perceived improvement.

The ‘it’s worked for me for 20 years’ argument may be self-centred rather than pedagogical, but it does provide useful evidence of the need for high-quality staff support. If academics have a responsibility to their students, so managers and institutions have a responsibility to their staff. Given that opposition to online marking is almost always expressed by those who do not yet have the skills to deliver it, there is clearly a staff training issue to be addressed. And this needs to be more than a one-off Friday afternoon showing a small group how to set up a TurnItIn dropbox. Generic ongoing IT literacy must be supported and maintained. In the digital age, communicative teachers need to be able to embed a video, operate simple content management systems, resize a JPEG, make pdfs, share collaborative documents, take a screenshot, store files in the cloud, manipulate a search engine’s advanced features, record an audio file, and most importantly, provide links to other sources of learning. And the challenge of supporting digital immigrants (by which I mean all of us older than about 35) will never be greater than it is now. 15 years ago it wasn’t an issue – students were expecting to receive paper feedback, and in any case the online tools weren’t good enough to provide a better alternative. 15 years hence it won’t be an issue – the majority of the teaching workforce will be naturally digitally literate, having been born into an online society. So the tension we see now, between early and late adopters, will naturally disappear as technology, staff literacy and student benefit combine. If you’re reading these words any time after, say, 2016, you’re probably wondering what all the fuss was about.

2012’s intake of students were born around 1994 and have only ever known a wired world, at home and at school. By contrast, most of us started our professional lives in a pre-Internet age, and have had to adapt our practices – as teachers and as learners – as new tools have become available. The Internet is a new communication tool for our society, enabling instantaneous transfer of information and ideas from one to many, from many to one, or from many to many. As academics we are professional communicators, and many of us are understandably excited by the current and future opportunities for better communication with learners and colleagues. But we’re learning a new language, and we must work together to ensure that our fluency is shared.

References: You’ll notice that this article isn’t Harvard referenced. Rather, it is hyperlinked. Harvard referencing was invented around 1881 as a system of enabling scholars to follow paper-based trails of information by providing enough metadata about a work to enable it to be located in a physical library. Most other citation systems predate the Internet. Hyperlinks were invented in the mid 1960s and are the primary method by which users navigate online. It may be interesting to speculate whether these long established citation systems decline as the same rate as the need to access information in its physical form.
Try it, late adopter: ah go on, go on, go on........

Dr Brian Griffin. Senior Lecturer History

During a brief triangular exchange of e-mails between Chris, Joe and me in the lead-up to this article, Joe used the expression ‘late adopters’ to describe those of us who have not ‘embraced’ (or been forced to embrace, as I see it) online marking. I suspect that this is really onliner polite-speak for ‘Luddite’. Privately, I view onliner proselytizers as shocktroops of a Borg invasion, who have infiltrated the corridors of Starship BSU in a determined effort to assimilate the rest of us into their online marking dystopia; but publicly, I shall refer to them as onliner proselytizers. I don’t mind being considered a Luddite over the issue of online marking, by the way, as I think we are as justified in regarding it as representing a threat to our well-being as workers, as the historical Luddites were proven to be correct in viewing the technological innovations that they faced as a threat to their livelihoods. I am not opposed to technological change qua change, but only to technological change that I believe will detrimentally affect an important part of my working life and our students’ learning experience. Hopefully the following points will explain why I feel this way.

Currently, when I mark students’ written work, it takes me an average of 45-60 minutes to mark a 2,000 to 3,000 word essay – this involves doing everything from correcting punctuation and grammar, where appropriate, to writing marginalia in the text and writing comments on the feedback sheet. First Class essays naturally do not take of this length of time. I enjoy doing this, and I am very good at it, as indicated by student feedback and external examiners’ comments over the years. It is a holistic process, and because the scripts are on paper I can easily follow the progress of students’ arguments and see whether they are structured in a coherent or logical fashion, and can easily and quickly flick back and forwards through the text as required. It is quicker and a more focused process than the online alternative, where I would have to constantly stop the flow of reading the essay to find the correct formatting instructions to make the necessary emendation or comment on the computer – something I can do much more quickly with my pen. Flicking back through the essay will no longer be a straightforward process, as anyone who has tried to read online articles on JSTOR will be aware. What is now a relatively quick and straightforward process would, instead, become a cumbersome one, and my students would be the poorer for it because I would no longer easily achieve the same holistic overview of the individual student’s work. Even if one ignores the obstructive effect of having to constantly stop to use the correct computer formatting to do something that one can do instantly with a pen, there is the problem that one simply can’t absorb the contents of online text as easily as one can absorb the contents of paper text. This is why so many of us print out JSTOR articles, rather than trying to read them on our computer screens; it is also why publishers ask us to read and mark paper proofs, as they know it is easier and more efficient for the reader to read and edit paper copies. One spots errors etc more easily on paper. Online marking threatens to transform a straightforward and pleasurable process into a slower, cumbersome one, and the tutorial process would undoubtedly be ascumbersome and unsatisfactory as that involved in the unlamented ePARS tutorials.
The wretched ePARS tutorials demonstrate the unsatisfactory nature of attempting online or paperless tutorials on something that students have written, I believe. I found that when my tutees came to see me, after submitting their forms online, I had to constantly read what was on the screen and then turn to the student to discuss what he/she had written; the computer screen dominated the proceedings. Eventually, I got so fed up that I simply cut and pasted the students’ comments and printed them out into one or two A4 pages for myself and my tutees, which made for a much more satisfactory tutorial for all concerned. I am aware that this defeated the purpose of the paperless system, but I found it was the only way to make it workable. Imagine trying to go conduct a paperless tutorial on a 2,000 word or 3,000 word essay, or, perish the thought, a 10,000 word dissertation. This will presumably involve more trawling through the marked-up text on the computer screen, to the frustration of tutor and tutee alike. Count me out. I’d much rather have the marked-up copy of the written assignment essay etc in my hand, along with my printed out feedback sheet, for obvious reasons.

As an aside, I’m guessing that not even the most ardent advocates of online marking prevent their tutees from printing out their own copy of their marked-up work, or of their feedback sheets – if they are really serious and consistent about the environmental benefits of the paperless essay etc, they should prevent this, but I suspect that claims about the alleged environmental benefits are a sham, and that the students are allowed to print out the marked-up assignments anyway.

There are also health implications of spending even more time on computers, which online marking would definitely involve. I would like to note here that our Safety, Health and Environment website states that ‘The use of a laptop at home [where most of us do most of our marking] is to be avoided unless it is for short periods of time’. Does anyone seriously believe that marking lengthy written assignments will involve ‘short periods of time’, whether at home or at work? On the contrary, we will be spending even more time at our computer screens than we do now. I think here of a former BSU colleague, who was both epileptic and had RSI, whose last years at work were very unhappy ones, mainly because of the length of time he had to spend glued to his computer screen. This is, admittedly, an extreme case, but why should any of us have to spend more time at our computers than we already do, whether as teachers or researchers/authors? One doesn’t have to be epileptic or to have RSI to find prolonged exposure to computer screens to be an unpleasant experience. Adding huge amounts of online marking on top of what we already do online as teachers and scholars is a deeply uncongenial prospect – for me, certainly, and I suspect for others as well.

It is instructive to look at this year’s National Student Satisfaction results, as they reveal rather interesting data on how our students view online marking and the Luddite alternative. I know of only one School that uses online marking (although there may be others), with the staff concerned using online marking to varying degrees – some are enthusiastic advocates, while I am informed that others do not use it at all. I give here the relevant NSS results from their students and those from my own Department*, which does not use any online marking of students’ written work:
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<td>been prompt</td>
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<td>I have received detailed</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>89</td>
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<td>comments on my work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feedback on my work</td>
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<td>51</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>82</td>
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<td>has helped me clarify</td>
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These results suggest that our students do not recognize many of the alleged benefits of online marking, such as its alleged fairness, promptness, clarity and facility for giving detailed comments; on the contrary, in fact. The Luddite historians and philosophers, who do not use any online marking of written work, would appear to be providing a much more satisfactory assessment experience for their students in all of these areas, than those in the School which uses a combination of online and traditional marking procedures. Were I to be facetious, I would suggest that the other three subjects (which I won’t identify, although I’d be happy to let Joe know which ones they are) should adopt the experiment of marking on paper only, given the comparatively higher satisfaction ratings from my Department’s students, but I would not be so presumptuous. I would like to emphasize here that this is emphatically not an attack on my colleagues in the three departments concerned; I believe that they, like all BSU teaching staff, have our students’ best interests at heart. I just don’t agree that online marking of written work is an improvement on our current form of marking, and our students would appear to agree with this. I have no problem with the three subjects in deciding the assessment procedures that are best suited for their purposes, and all I ask is that the onliner proselytizers return the same courtesy. To return to the Borg, with their ‘greeting’ of ‘You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile’. It may well prove to be the case that resistance to online marking of written work at BSU is futile, given the high-level moves that appear to be under way to make us ‘adopt’ it, but I still think it is worth fighting it, for our sakes and for our students’ sakes.

*data for Study of Religions not applicable in 2011

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Branch Chair John Newsinger outlines his thoughts on the ConDem Minister For Education, Michael Gove.

**BY GOVE! EDUCATION AND THE MURDOCH EMPIRE**

‘I’m a great admirer of Rupert Murdoch, he’s a force of nature, a phenomenon, he’s a great man’

Michael Gove 3 October 2011 at the Conservative Party Conference

During their first fourteen months in office, Cabinet ministers met senior News International executives 130 times. Over a quarter of these meetings involved David Cameron himself. While in no way wishing to be fair to Cameron, it has to be acknowledged that his government merely continued a long-established tradition of British governments kow-towing to Murdoch. This tradition began to take shape under Harold Wilson in the late 1970s, was consolidated under Thatcher, deepened under Blair and Brown and looked set to become even more extravagant under Cameron. There can be little doubt that the savage cuts inflicted on the BBC, for example, are very much a favour to Murdoch! And, of course, Cameron had at his side the former News of the World editor, Andy Coulson, someone whom he was apparently giving ‘a second chance’.

All this is reasonably well known. What is less well-known is that Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, has met Murdoch himself six times and News International executives more than a dozen times. Why? What have they had to discuss and should we be worried? Gove, of course, used to be a senior member of the editorial team at The Times and was apparently being groomed as its future editor. His wife is still a journalist on the paper. He is a hard-line neocon, still strongly supportive of the invasion of Iraq and convinced we are engaged in a World War with Islamism. Indeed, he has described Islamism as a greater danger to the West than either Nazism or Communism ever were, an opinion that puts him very much in the Fox News camp.

Gove is certainly someone who Murdoch feels at home with. But what on earth can they have had to talk about? Has Murdoch developed a passion for educational standards in his old age? Not even his best friend would accuse him of such a concern. Murdoch’s twin obsessions are profit and power. We can be absolutely certain that what these two men discussed was how Murdoch can make money out of the British educational system.

Murdoch has identified education as the great new commercial opportunity in our neoliberal world. As he put it with regard to education in the USA: ‘we see a $500 billion sector in the US alone that is waiting desperately to be transformed’. To exploit this opportunity, he bought the US company, Wireless Generation, a software, assessment tools and data services company, for $360 million and has appointed Joel Klein, New York’s former education chief (whom Gove has also met), as a senior News Corp vice-president.
Klein made a name for himself as a bitter enemy of the teacher unions in New York, championing payment by results, the ending of job security and the cutting back of teachers’ benefits, especially pensions. He is a strong supporter of replacing teachers with software, with interactive programmes. Rather than this technology being there to assist teachers, it is really there to replace and de-professionalise them in the interests of Profit. This is what Murdoch and Gove are about. Murdoch has publicly stated that half the teachers in Britain could be dispensed with if the new technology is embraced. This would allow the government to, once and for all, break the teacher unions in Britain and create the ‘free market’ in schooling of which they dream.

Murdoch was to sponsor an Academy, which would serve as a Trojan horse, opening up State education for him. Gove actually showed Rebekah Brooks, James Harding, the editor of The Times and another Murdoch man, Will Lewis, around a prospective site for the new academy in Newham, East London. It would specialise in journalism, (together with phone hacking, bribing the police and concealing evidence presumably). Current scandals have put all this on hold, but as Gove made clear at the Tory Conference, Murdoch is ‘a great man’ and he is in there rooting for him still.

Breaking the teacher unions is undoubtedly one of the government’s key objectives in education. The Academies and Free Schools are all being encouraged not to recognise the trade unions and to break away from national pay and conditions agreements. At the Ashcroft Academy in Wandsworth (sponsored by Lord Ashcroft, the billionaire former treasurer and vice-chairman of the Conservative Party), not only are the unions not recognised, but the staff have had a no-strike contract imposed on them. It was one of only a handful of schools where there is no fight to defend teachers pensions. Murdoch’s involvement in British schools( and eventually Further and Higher Education) is part and parcel of an intention to do a ‘slow Wapping’ to teachers (and lecturers). Their unions will be broken, many will lose their jobs, most of those who remain will be de-professionalised, working without job security, for falling real wages and declining benefits. This is what Murdoch and Gove were talking about.
We live in a world in which corporate CEO’s and senior managers are feted as a class of Ubermensch to whom the rest of us mere mortals owe gratitude, allegiance and deference.

It is often claimed that the multi-national corporations rival nation-states in terms of global power and influence. The managers of these corporations earn staggering 6 and 7 figure salaries, eat in the finest restaurants, wear the smartest clothes, travel first class, (if not by private jet and chauffeur driven limousine), so that they can meet with and influence the world’s political leaders – all at shareholders or tax payers expense.

And yet for the most part these corporate Ubermensch are not innovative, risk-taking, capitalist entrepreneurs. On the contrary for the most part they are time-serving corporate apparatchiks who have never risked anything in their lives and who are often handsomely rewarded - even when the organisations they manage spectacularly and publicly fail. What on earth is going on?

Thatcher’s reactionary revolution in the Eighties not only undermined the Unions and the Left in general – which was of course it’s primary aim – but it also had the side-effect of empowering corporate managers.

Thatcher claimed she wanted to encourage risk-taking entrepreneurs who would dynamically revitalise the UK economy. What she actually did was open up a power vacuum that has been filled by corporate managers who generally speaking are bureaucratic, bourgeois, suburban and above all risk-averse; it’s just that today these are attributes that the corporate system values highly.

In the UK “class” division is still at the core of our society. Ideas of monarch versus subject, master versus servant, white collar versus blue collar, are all deep in the English psyche. But this is not only a psychological reality; a wealthy, privately educated elite do actually still govern us and most people’s perception of their own “class” is a significant part of how they define themselves. The public and managers themselves have confused being a manager with being superior in some nebulous class-related way.

Corporate managerialism has self-servingly conflated ideas of class, entrepreneurialism and big business and given rise to the ‘cult of the manager’. This is what enabled the offensively huge salaries to be paid to what are essentially timeserving company men.

There is one overriding qualification for corporate management that trumps all others, and that is obedience - above all to be a successful corporate manager you must be able and willing to do what you are told - to take orders.

And yet the ability to take orders seems fundamentally at odds with the notions of creativity, autonomy and intellectual independence that even the management theorists themselves admit are necessary for organisations to succeed.
Despite this, obedient managers are rewarded as if they are contributing to the organisation in a uniquely crucial way. But to what extent is this true? Is the Head Of Resource Allocation of a Hospital really more important to the delivery of core services than the frontline doctors and nursing staff? Why does the Head Of Estates of a University deserve so much more remuneration than those who directly deliver education to students?

Even theoretically a school or university could not function without teachers, a hospital without doctors, a court without lawyers and judges, an army without soldiers. But both practically and theoretically such institutions could function without managers – because the teachers, doctors, lawyers and soldiers themselves could undertake the functions of managers. Indeed, historically this is often what happened with practitioners becoming managers.

But the rise of the MBA and the influence of the Harvard Business school theory that managing all organisations is basically the same has had a terrible effect on the status of people actually doing the thing the organisation is meant to be doing and led to the development of a managerialist class who have been specifically trained to ‘manage’ as if this was a core activity in its own right.

The purpose of a hospital is to provide health care. The purpose of a school or university is to provide education. The purpose of a TV production company is to make TV programmes. Yet in order to gain status and maximum financial reward you have to be promoted away from those core activities.

From the perspective of the MBA manager “the core activity” has become irrelevant and the insistence by practitioners of “the core activity” that their particular core activity is different from other core activities and that it has to be managed appropriately is regarded by managers as Luddite and self-serving.

This has led to the significant diminution in status of all core activities and a corresponding increase in the status (and remuneration) of managers. In the health service, schools, universities, local authorities, the creative industries, retail, customer services....... anywhere you care to look in fact, it is managers who have power, status and money; the actual doctors, nurses, teachers, writers, designers, etc. have been reduced to cogs in a managerial machine.

Instead of management supporting and facilitating the core activity, the core activity now supports and facilitates the management.

 Managers tend to use three main justifications for their elevated status and enhanced remuneration:

1. Hard-work
2. Talent
3. Responsibility

I’m not going to spend much time on the first of these, “hard-work”, as it is so clearly ludicrous.
For a manager to claim that they ‘work harder’ than a miner or a Junior Doctor or an immigrant cleaner doing three full-time, minimum wage jobs to support her children, is frankly offensive. I’m sure any miner, nurse or cleaner would be happy to spend a day ‘going to meetings’, or ‘making difficult decisions’, rather than the unrewarding, low-paid, low-status, back-breaking work they actually have to do. Sure some managers work hard but then so do the vast majority of us.

I’m also not going to spend much time on the second of these defences. Really talented managers are very, very rare. Most managers are not ‘talented’ in any meaningful sense of the word. There are definitely a set of skills common to managers the world over and most prominent amongst these are obedience and caution but are we seriously expected to regard an ability to do what you are told and a capacity to avoid taking any decisions as ‘talents’?

This is not to deny that good managers who are inspiring strategic thinkers, who can motivate staff and improve services don’t exist, or that they shouldn’t be valued. No, I simply saying that in the corporate world a manager’s remuneration actually has little or nothing to do with those leadership skills. Indeed, individuals do not get rewarded per se; on the contrary current managerial risk-management theory demands that organisations protect themselves from reliance on talented individuals. In reality it is the ‘role’ that carries the remuneration, the position in the hierarchy that reflects the level of reward, not the talent of the individual.

But surely the third defence of managers, the issue of ‘responsibility’, is a legitimate one. Surely, it is fair that managers are remunerated for taking on decision-making responsibility, if the ‘buck stops here’, then surely that justifies higher pay. (And, OK, I promise to stop calling you Shirley).

Perhaps, it does, but it also begs the question of why coordinating the core activity of an organisation is regarded as more worthy of financial reward than undertaking the actual core activity itself?

In Higher Education for example Subject or Programme Leaders get paid more than lecturers and get a ‘remission’ from teaching in order to fulfil their managerial duties. (20-30% less teaching). As you rise through the management hierarchy your pay rises and remission from teaching increases until at the highest paid levels of management you are doing no teaching at all.

This system literally values teaching at the bottom of the skills hierarchy and values certain types of administrative and coordinating skills at the top? Why? What if people started in HE as administrators and got promoted into teaching posts with increasing remission from administrative duties until at the peak of their career and their earnings, they were teaching 100% of the time? Wouldn’t this be a more appropriate relative valuation of teaching skills? We’re talking about organisations dedicated to education after all?

The responsibility argument also raises the question of just how ‘responsible’ managers actually are? How much risk are they actually taking? From the bottom of the hierarchy looking up it certainly appears to most of us that the further up the greasy pole you go the more pay you get and the more inured you are from the consequences of risk.
Senior Managers in both the public and private sectors have been allowed to negotiate severance packages whereby if they fail in their duties and are sacked or resign they become cash millionaires with pensions beyond most people’s imagining.

Senior managers fail and they become members of the idle rich; if the rest of us fail we become unemployed.

If, as I argue, obedience and caution are two of the most valued characteristics of a corporate manager, most corporate managers will simply do what they are told by their managers. My own experience is that most managers seem to go to great efforts to avoid having to make a personal judgement. Indeed, this is often the stated aim of bureaucratic risk-management processes - to take personal judgement out of the decision making process.

This is even acknowledged by management theorists themselves. Peter F. Drucker, American management guru, famously said, “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” And for most highly paid managers ‘doing things right’, i.e. obeying the rules and filling out the forms correctly, is as close as they get to ‘taking responsibility’ for anything.

One could also argue that the ‘extra-responsibility’ argument is a direct result of the top-down command structure so ubiquitous in global management practice. If organisations adopted a more democratic and inclusive decision making process that formally included staff and service users, then managers would not have to ‘make difficult decisions’, on the contrary they would be articulating collective decisions for which they were not personally responsible.

I am not arguing here that managerial skills are trivial or unimportant, merely that they are simply a particular kind of skill, on a par with many others, and that they do not warrant the mega-salaries and privileges that are currently awarded to even the most undistinguished, timeserving, middle-manager.

Certainly since 1979 there has been an assumption in UK corporate management that managers must have ‘the right to manage’ and that it is the job (nee duty) of managers to command the staff of the organisation they manage.

There is a macho culture of managers aggressively asserting themselves over staff and external communities while they ‘take tough decisions’ to maximise shareholder profit or make public services ‘more efficient’.

Indeed, management theorists have often self-consciously adopted the attitudes of tyrants and warmongers. Managers read Sun Tzu’s The Art Of War and The Prince by Machiavelli. They fantasise about “taking out” opponents and “wupping arses”. This macho posturing is not worthy of the playground let alone the adult workplace and is, in any event, entirely delusional; managers are not warriors they are corporate bureaucrats who do what they are told and spend their lives working for a regular salary and a handsome pension. It is hard to think of an occupation further from that of a warrior!
The development of managerialism since 1979 followed a period after WWII in which there was a broad consensus amongst voters, managers, politicians and workers that when taking decisions management could and indeed should take into account the opinions and interests of staff and the wider community as well as customers and service users.

Thus during the post-war consensus the idea developed that management should fulfil an administrative coordinating function rather than a top-down command function and that decision making in the workplace could and should be democratised and that workers and/or their representatives should have a role in determining an organisation’s strategy and policy.

Indeed, in the most successful and dominant European economy, Germany, these ideas are still common currency.

As the ConDems continue to try to dismantle the vestiges of the post-war welfare state, it is clear that trade unions will seek to fight job losses and the expected diminution of terms & conditions and pensions. If this happens it is inevitable that we will again hear the cry that “managers must have the right to manage”. But this raises a number of questions about what it is to manage, what it means to be a manager and in whose interest managers are managing. In fact, when you think about it, what can it possibly mean to have the “right” to manage?

Managers fulfil functions within organisations just like everyone else. Individual managers are assigned specific tasks that the organisation needs completing in order for it to function effectively. In this sense a manager is no different from an unskilled labourer; if either of them fail to carry out their duties the effective running of the organisation will be undermined.

In my personal experience management has almost always been a problem to be overcome, rather than a body that enables and supports the core activity of an organisation.

I would argue that no special deference is due to managers just because they fulfil this particular type of function within the organisation. And despite the T.I.N.A rhetoric of the ConDems, there are alternatives to this hierarchical way of organising joint human activities and we need to challenge and eventually extinguish the Cult Of The Manager and fight for a more democratic way of managing our businesses, services and organisations.
QUOTE OF THE MONTH 2

‘Politicians are unanimous about the role of universities in providing the knowledge and skills demanded by British capitalism as it attempts to compete in an increasingly crowded world market. Manifestoes, policy statements and speeches have little or nothing to say about what the Americans call ‘the liberal arts’ and the British ‘the humanities’. These, it seems, are luxuries we can ill afford, indulgencies we regard with pained expressions, as we focus on the dizzy possibilities of the digital economy… (the new universities) stand testimony to the success of the neoliberal counter-revolution. Entombed within, breathing only the stale air of an ‘academy’ from which all critique and counter-culture has been virtually eradicated, are the proto-proletarians of a digitised ‘knowledge-based’ capitalism. To enter the main campus complex of the University of Hertfordshire—to take my local example—is like entering the atrium of a City bank. There is the same numbing brainlessness, the same suffocating absence of thought and imagination, the same absoluteness about the unquestioning conformity. So drained of intellect, culture, and politics are they that many of these places are the very negation of ‘universities’. There is nothing ‘higher’ about them. They are skills factories turning out labour units in an environment that combines the clinical functionalism of Huxley’s Brave New World, the political conformity of Orwell’s 1984, and the bureaucratic absurdity of Kafka’s The Trial.’

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