



When will it all end? Restructuring higher education – again

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Our university is being restructured – again! I'm mentioning this here because the earlier restructure of the University of Western Sydney Nepean (1998–2000) can be defined as an experiment in good adult education practice and organisational management based on visions of equity, accessibility and shared responsibility, visions that are dear to the hearts of quite a few adult educators. Driven by a well-known adult educator in the role of University President, the last restructure reflected principles of adult education, learning organisations and a commitment to the development of human potential. For two years we were in institutional heaven (by comparison with the pre-1998 era).

We were able to make decisions about our work environment, the development of new programs and of partnerships with non-academic organisations. We opened up access to higher education by taking seriously the recognition of prior learning, formal and informal. We were committed to a notion of social accountability and responsiveness to the needs of the communities in Western Sydney and we actually made collective decisions of self-management (shock, horror). Instead of discipline-based faculties we worked in decentralised small units, some multi-disciplinary, with some control over our budgets. Individuals had a choice of the unit they joined, and the power to achieve collectively and individually. Obviously there is no revolution here and as the performance indicators soared, we thought we were on to a good thing. However, such changes were achieved at the cost of disempowering traditional seats of decision-making, power and influence, and the success of the new structure was never going to pacify the old guard, who clung to sandstone ideals, and waited on the sidelines.

Somewhat predictably, in our current restructure, the empire strikes back. We now stand to lose a number of important aspects of our emerging culture, including newly found

notions and experiences of a democratic academic workplace, downward as well as upward accountability by senior managers, and consultation and inclusiveness. We appear to be moving backwards into the traditional spaces of hierarchical decision-making, the unchallenged position of the professoriate, an approach to leadership based on rank and formal qualifications, and discipline-focused schools. In short the old is back, out with the new, both in concepts and personnel. The lucky ones who can, will escape.

What does it all mean? It is somewhat ironic that institutions whose role it is to 'produce' individuals capable of critical thinking, rational argument and debate, considered action and reflection, deny the majority of their own institutional actors any meaningful, ongoing participation and organisational decision-making. Restructure documents explicitly devalue democratic processes. Does our short-lived experience of genuine workplace participation mean that visions of worker empowerment offer poor combat to hierarchy, elitism and exclusion? Why is it that democracy has such poor value placed on it in the very institutions that are supposed to encourage vigorous and robust debate? Is the university as a learning organisation a trendy, superficial notion of inclusive workplace change, and only acceptable when the outcomes are controlled and controllable by some form of appointed leadership? The restructure embodies a broader struggle over what a university is, and what it aims to achieve – and within that broad struggle, how workers and managers are involved in change processes, or in change rhetoric. Our aspirations and our potential have been thwarted in the new restructure. Once again, sound principles of adult education have momentarily transformed an organisation's possibilities, but in the end have had to surrender to traditional vested interests. What a waste!