

ATTACK!

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Attack! 41 Professors Part 2

Portrait of a professor continued

The shadow of the high academic life as represented by the professor's, passed gravely over his consciousness. It was an ordered life without real material cares. He would be bound by rules of the institution and the discipline. A feverish quickening of the pulse followed, and a din of meaningless words drove his reasoned thoughts confusedly. Some instinct quickened within him at every near approach to that life, an instinct subtle and hostile, and armed him against acquiescence. What had become of that pride of his spirit which had always made him conceive of himself as being apart in every order?

Professor ...

His name in that new life leaped into characters before his eyes and to it there followed a mental sensation of an undefined face or colour of a face. The face was eyeless and sour-faced and devout, shot with pink tinges of suffocated anger.

He was passing at that moment before the main university building and wondered vaguely which window would be his if he ever joined that world. Then he wondered at the vagueness of his wonder, at the remoteness of his own soul from what he had hitherto imagined his sanctuary, at the frail hold which so many years of order and disciplined obedience had of him when once a definite and irrevocable act of his threatened to end for ever, in time and in eternity, his freedom. The voice of the professor urging upon him the proud claims of his academic discipline and the mystery and power of the academic office repeated itself in his memory. His spirit was not there to hear and greet it and he knew that the exhortation he had listened to had already fallen into an idle formal tale. He would never mount the rostrum as a high academic. His destiny was to be elusive of such a fate. The wisdom of the professor's appeal did not touch him to the quick. He was destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering among the snares of the world.

He crossed the bridge over the stream, then, bending to the left, he followed the lane which led up to his house. The faint sour stink of rotted cabbages came towards him from the kitchen gardens on the rising ground above the river. He smiled to think that it was this disorder, the misrule and confusion of his father's house and the stagnation of vegetable life, which was to win the day in his soul.



Alison Gilmore replies to my criticism of New Zealand quantitative professors, and my response

From: "Alison Gilmore" <alison.gilmore@canterbury.ac.nz> To: <ksmythe@wave.co.nz> Cc: <terry.crooks@otago.ac.nz>; <jeffrey.smith@otago.ac.nz>; <lisa.smith@otago.ac.nz>; <j.hattie@auckland.ac.nz>; <charles.darr@nzcer.org.nz> Sent: Tuesday, February 16, 2010 2:16 PM

Dear Mr Smythe

I read your article with some dismay. There are many factual inaccuracies contained within it as well as an unfortunate tone, seeking to represent the New Zealand Assessment Academy as a clique of myopic psychometricians with a lust for high stakes testing. (Note, it is not the New Zealand Academy for Assessment as you have written.) I find the use of the term 'quantitatives' derogatory, as you seek to represent them as creatures that have crawled out from under a rock, or have landed from Mars determined to sweep major measurement damage to the educational system with malicious intent. The description of the New Zealand Assessment Academy as a 'cute little group of like-minded quantitatives' is similarly deliberately demeaning and incorrect. If you sought to understand the nature of the Academy and its aims before commenting on them, you would know that students, teachers and principals, and good teaching and learning are at the heart of our intentions.

Do not be mistaken by assuming that the group of 'experts' who make up the membership of the Academy are quantitatives in the sense of being decontextualised psychometricians without an interest or passion for excellence in education. Do not be mistaken by assuming that the members of the group are like-minded. Do not be mistaken by assuming that the Academy has particular views without taking the time and care to learn about them. Do not be mistaken by assuming that we are having 'cosy little meetings with the Minister' without the interests of teachers and students. These assumptions are plainly wrong. If you wish to comment on the activities of the Academy, might you be better advised to learn, before speaking out?

Alison Gilmore

Executive Director New Zealand Assessment Academy

Associate Professor University of Otago

Dear Alison Gilmore

Thank-you for your reply. I always appreciate such challenges to my writing and thinking because, despite my tone and apparently flippant attitude, I do want to get it right. Your letter, however, except for a mistake in a name, establishes no inaccuracies – just different viewpoints. Nor does your letter contest the main ideas in the posting.

No – I do not in any way think of your group members as coming from Mars or, even, in one case, from Krypton. Your colourful expression ‘clique of myopic psychometricians with a lust for high stakes testing’ overstates my attitude. ‘Clique’ I have to accept as being a reasonable interpretation of what I wrote; but ‘myopic’ – no, more naively self-serving; ‘a lust for high stakes’ testing’ – no, not a lust just a carelessness in allowing high stakes’ testing to be, what you probably see as an unfortunate but unavoidable by-product of what you do. The ‘lust for high stakes’ testing’ comes from governments pursuing power extension and populist policies, using quantitatives and their research as a rationale and cover.

The term ‘quantitatives’ is derogatory and was meant to be. Around the western world, quantitative academics are invariably the ones advising governments on policies like scientific management, national standards, performance pay, and curriculum development. These governments do not give much of a hearing to different perceptions of the curriculum, or to the sociological perspective.

I have written at length on the motivations of academics (especially in the postings on the ‘Battle for Primary School Reading’) and find little difference in their motivations from powerful people in other occupations. Any difference in this respect, being an inability for academics to see themselves in anything but the purest of lights. I do not believe ‘you are determined to sweep major measurement damage to the educational system with malicious intent’; as there is no evidence you are doing it with ‘malicious intent’. It is more happening, as I indicated above, from being naively self-serving and unrelentingly self-righteous.

All groups in education believe that ‘students, teachers and principals, and good teaching and learning are at the heart of [their] intentions’ but that is of little comfort for any of those groups being harmed. All this, of course, is a matter of judgement, but I believe, and many in education believe, that the dominance of quantitative academics in education is a serious source of education harm. It’s not your good intentions as academics or goodness as people that are in question, or that your points-of-view are all the same. In this respect, you seemed to have missed a major idea in the posting: very good people, with very good intentions, can be members of groups and institutions that can do some very bad things. Indeed, people being very good and having good intentions can serve to allow groups and institutions to get away with murder.

John Hattie has called the New Zealand Assessment Academy ‘his group’ and will be ‘made up of researchers specialising in assessment measurement’. (Sounds like quantitative research to me.) Hattie said he did not support the introduction of league tables but with the ‘introduction of national standards’ they were ‘inevitable, so it was important to work out a fair solution’ (New Zealand Herald, 6 February, 2010).

Let us go back a little. John Key said Hattie gave him ‘the idea for national standards’ (which, of course, is only a half-truth). So Hattie is for national standards which, by his admission, inevitably results in league tables, which he is against. How much sense does that make? Hattie now puts himself forward as the person who can ameliorate both national standards and league tables and save the government’s bacon. As well, as I made clear in my letter to Terry Crooks, ameliorating national standards and their adjunct, league tables, is oxymoronic.

Your group’s current focus is an admission by all its members that national standards are now set in the system. However, out in the field, there is still huge resistance, with the possibility of a long-running standoff. I find the formation of your group not an expression of pragmatism, as you probably see it, but betrayal. This is the kind of ethically dubious behaviour that group dynamics can lead to. The ill-effects of quantitative academics in western world education systems come not so much from something inherent in quantitative research, but from its suffocating dominance: a dominance that has arisen from governments and bureaucrats wanting an ideology of certainty and measurement accountability to extend their power.

An acknowledged unfairness in my letter does, to some extent, flow from a narrative that starts with USA legislation in the ‘80s that set up control of education by measurement accountability, and ends up in 2010 in New Zealand with a committee of measurement assessment experts charged with ameliorating the introduction of national standards and league tables. Differences in background, philosophy, and aspiration of members of this committee were rather bundled together, but I thought you would have made the connection with how the dynamics of groups and institutions can lead to certain outcomes that people, as individuals, wouldn’t necessarily support.

That proviso aside, I stand by my assumptions and the contents of my posting.

Yours sincerely

Kelvin Smythe

