The Last Word on Bekkerman and Lucy

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Of course, I hope this is not the last word since the point of this exercise has been to stimulate discussion about what are very important issues for higher education.

I was delighted when JET decided to publish "Lucy" as a forum piece with several reactions followed by these final thoughts from me. I asked several academic administrators from Penn State to provide an administrator's point of view. I felt that, since "Lucy" might be perceived as a reaction to Penn State, it was appropriate to give them a chance to respond. They declined, gracefully, because it might look contrived. I turned to my friend Dave Forsythe from the University of Nebraska to provide the administrator's vantage. I knew Professor Forsythe could not deny his faculty roots and would have interesting ideas. I asked an old friend and colleague, Ted McDorman, from the Law Faculty at the University of Victoria, to provide a Canadian perspective on Lucy. This gets to the heart of a major issue, that is, is Lucy a uniquely American phenomenon? The answer provided by Professor McDorman and Ms Lindgren, "yes and no," is the only right one.

Canada is a major academic interest of mine. I teach Canadian government as part of my Introduction to Comparative Politics (Pl Sc 3) course at Penn State. I have spent two sabbatical leaves in Canada, one at the University of Victoria and another at the University of New Brunswick. I feel I can comment on the issue of whether Lucy applies in Canada. Professor McDorman and Ms Lindgren have made important points in this regard, so I shall focus on several additional angles.

The dominant theme of Lucy is that universities are different and should be treated differently in order to fulfill their missions. Faculty are at the core of universities for the deceptively simple – yet often misunderstood – reason: it is they who do the principal things for

which universities exist. Students are essential, but they do not have the perspective and, yes, often the wisdom, to see the whole picture. I believe several basic differences between Canadian and American Universities make Bekkermanisation less likely in Canada.

Financial rewards for faculty who enter academic administration are much greater in the United States. This tends to create an administrative class that, over the years and decades, gets out of touch with teaching and research and starts to believe its own publicity brochures. Canadian universities place more limits on how market forces can affect faculty salaries. In the United States, it is common for beginning assistant professor salaries to vary by a factor of two. In Canada, often because of faculty associations, there is much less variation. Once one accepts the argument that the market requires a new Ph.D. in Management Information Systems to be paid US $80,000 per year while a new assistant professor of history gets half that, it becomes much harder to argue that the university is a unique institution that must be protected from the extremes of the marketplace.

Let me both agree and disagree with Professor Forsythe, only appropriate since he did the same to Lucy. Lucy does *not* advocate doing away with affirmative action, being mean to students, and being unwilling to compete for scarce resources within our market-oriented economy. Forsythe is right about achieving a balance among values. In many ways, American – and to a lesser extent Canadian – higher education have lost this balance for reasons I tried to illustrate in Lucy. Course evaluation questionnaires (CEQs) are a case in point. I do not long for the old days, old in this case means before about 1955, when professors lectured and students had no right to express their opinion about the quality of their courses. Most colleges in the United States and Canada now use these questionnaires regularly.

But, as I wrote in *New Education*, we face a "Sundial/Stopwatch Dilemma" where we have gone overboard forgetting the limitations of these questionnaires (Gamble, 1990). There are many examples where institutions overuse these questionnaires, measuring the quality of a course by a single number expressed to two decimal points. Students are learning the power of CEQs. I know of cases where students have threatened faculty with low scores because examinations were difficult. There are instances where faculty have announced just before distributing CEQ forms, "if I do not get high scores, I will not

get tenure." This is exactly the point of Lucy – this overuse of CEQs is emblematic of the view that the quality of course can be measured as easily and precisely as that of coffee, T shirts, or desk chairs. It is not that simple.

The overuse of CEQs has had other consequences. One is increased distrust between faculty and administration. For someone who has taught and taught well for decades, to be required to use CEQs for each course is suggestive of Big Brother watching over us. More disturbing is the situation that I see at my college of Penn State. Most faculty have adjusted to the mandatory use of CEQs in each course and most manage to get very high scores. But, since scores run so high, faculty are discouraged from trying anything new or innovative in their teaching. If you usually score 6.3 on a seven point scale, any change in your teaching is likely to lower those scores; experimentation and innovation should be avoided.

Forsythe may be right – "we academics will increasingly be held to some real standards of efficiency and productivity." The difficulty lies in understanding whether they are real standards. Professor Forsythe illustrates many cases where the standards are phony. We have no choice but to let governing bodies and legislatures make broad resource allocation decisions. All institutions cannot be good in all areas and should not try to do everything. Faculty will complain when programs are cut. This process of competition for scarce resources works best when we do not lose sight of the basic job of universities as producers, analyzers, and transferors of knowledge. The allocation gets screwed up when universities compete – often successfully – for resources that are used for things that have nothing to do with knowledge. This can occur when universities run welfare programs or manufacturing operations. The line of demarcation can be difficult to draw, but we must draw it. We should study the effectiveness of welfare programs, but not run these programs.

Leaders in higher education usually underestimate the ability of legislators, governors, premiers, and donors to grasp the nature of universities. Certainly we can explain that higher education is different, for example, good research requires an openness and longer range view than is required of other institutions. We can explain that faculty for the most part work very hard and measuring that work by counting only the hours per week spent in classroom teaching is as

silly as paying legislators only for the hours the legislature is in session each year.

If I did a sequel to Lucy, Bekkerman would meet with a captain of industry. The industrialist would say "Dr. Bekkerman, the problem with CISU is that you are not relevant to the real world. Your ivory tower faculty must get involved in the world out there and do practical things." This idea of relevance to the real world may have done more damage to higher education than the consumer model we apply to our students. Certainly we must understand and explain the world; that is why we exist. But we are different from that world. We must have perspective and the ability to criticize or we risk being cheerleader first and analyst second.

In the 1970s, when I taught my first college class, I confronted a graduate seminar consisting mostly of mid-to-senior officers from the United States Army, Navy, Marine, and Coast Guard all of whom were older than I. I was to introduce them to the law of the sea. During my first lecture, a Marine Corps captain asked me, in essence, how I dared to teach him when I had never "driven a ship." Fortunately for me, several class members came to my rescue pointing out that they were in the course precisely to learn things they did not pick up from driving ships; knowing about the law of the sea would help them be better "ship drivers."

The Bekkermans of our universities do not understand or have forgotten the essence of the relationship between universities and the societies they serve. There must be a balance as all of us, Lindgren, Forsythe, McDorman and I, agree. Is the best analogy a fence with many gates or a semi-permeable membrane? The closest institutional parallel may be the judiciary. It is absurd to say that the Canadian or American Supreme Courts are apolitical. However, both countries realized that judicial institutions have to be shielded from some of the harsher, more capricious aspects of the political systems whose laws they interpret. It is the same with universities. Universities must have connections to, and a clear view of, society. That is the only way we can work our magic in the realm of knowledge. But knowledge work is among the most difficult and exacting of all human endeavors. It requires precisely the right environment to work its wonder. How do we achieve, sustain, and nurture that environment? Lucy and the Forsythe, McDorman, and Lindgren reactions contain workable suggestions. We can contain Bekkermanisation tendencies best by

being certain academic administrators not get too far removed from teaching and research, the cornerstones of our knowledge work. This knowledge work environment works best when various groups cooperate effectively. Professor Forsythe wrote when he became department chair he became the enemy. A degree of such feelings is unavoidable, perhaps even desirable, if it serves to remind administrators that knowledge work is not like being a sergeant in the United States Marine Corps. Because Forsythe came from the faculty, returned to the faculty, and has a superb record in teaching and research, it is much harder to pin the enemy label on him. And it is impossible to say he does not understand teaching and research.

The other divide that makes it more difficult to do knowledge work is between different faculty groups. Especially at comprehensive universities, faculty undertake an amazingly diverse range of activities. That is as it should be. But we must guard against huge gaps where some faculty, for example, art history, are treated like second class citizens who are paid much less, teach more, and have higher tenure/promotion hurdles to jump. We cannot and should not eliminate market forces from universities; but the unique university environment demands they be limited. Why? Faculty – all faculty – will not do their best knowledge work when they feel the institution within which they operate is fundamentally unfair. Many of the most vexing problems scholars address require the talents of many different disciplines; we cannot marshal this diverse group of disciplines if many of them feel marginalized.

Creating and sustaining this knowledge realm is not as difficult as many make it. We must be persistent and explain, patiently, over and over again, why universities are different and must not be subjected to the same rules as state/provincial departments of highways. We must have guts enough to ensure that certain kinds of work should *not* be undertaken by universities. That can be bitter medicine especially when money may be available. It is the Bekkermans of academia, out of touch with teaching and research, who are likely to undertake projects better left to other institutions.

It sounds almost Edmund Burkean, but we must *let* the knowledge realm operate; making it work is a contradiction in terms. A few years ago, I attended a conference on higher education sponsored by the Ditchley Foundation and held in Oxfordshire. Participants came from many countries; one thing we agreed upon was that universities now

spend so much time assessing, benchmarking, and evaluating, ourselves, our classes, our research, our colleagues, our students, that we have increasingly less time to do our jobs. A colleague of mine at Penn State, a decidedly unBekkerman person, gave a lecture to the college shortly before taking early retirement. In the lecture, he said, I have been at this college for 25 years and no administrator has asked me how he or she could help me to do my job more effectively. Most of us professors know what we are doing. We want to do it better and know what will help and what is a waste of time and money. Often we want to be left alone. Communicating the substance, techniques, and dynamics of poetry, quantum mechanics, and constitutional law is hard enough without unwarranted intrusion, worry about political correctness, and a constant fear that something we say might make a student feel uncomfortable.

REFERENCE

Gamble, J.K. (1990). Course evaluation questionnaires: The sundial/stopwatch dilemma. *New Education, 12*(1), 53-60.