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Death and Learning: a Twenty-first century perspective

The twenty-first century university was recently characterized as 'a thousand year old industry on the cusp of profound change' (Bokor, 2012). This is not a matter of individual universities needing to change, as they may well do, but of the whole sector being reshaped. There is death in the air at many universities as they try to manage multiple, and apparently endless, catastrophic changes. There are problems with academic culture and bureaucracies (Garret and Davies 2011). There are industrial problems, such as a rapidly growing underclass of adjuncts, one of who recently described suicide as her retirement plan (Scott 2014). Criminality shadows many institutions, such as a 'rape culture' (White House task Force 2014), and sexual and academic scandals in professional athletics (Luther, 2013, Gurney and Willingham 2014). There is a growing level of student debt (Selingo, 2013). It may be that grades are being systematically inflated (Arum and Roska 2011). The large lecture is often seen as an alienating and pointless experience (Clay and Breslow, 2006).

In this presentation, my methodology is literary, cultural and psychoanalytic. I discuss the twenty-first century university in the shadow of multiple wars and change. Through the writings of W.R. Bion and several literary works, including Jane Austen, Toni Morrison and Herta Müller, I consider the way the violence of the social works through the individual and the organisation. I finish with a consideration of some aspects of the indigenous Australian management of catastrophic change: a combination of flexibility, courage under fire, and a sense of the absurd, where the tragic and the comic can come together.