The Birth of an Organisation: ATEM and the Principle of Subsidiarity, Love and Other Ideals

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ABSTRACT: The article discusses the origins, present structure and future development of the Association for Tertiary Education Management Inc. in the light of the prinicpal of subsidiarity, the nature of love, and other ideals. The scope of the article is more philosophical than it is historical.

"Is there not greater room for a decentralisation of decision making, a return of responsibility to the constituent parts of the university, based on the excellent Principle of Subsidiarity 1: which holds that no responsibility should accrue to a higher body that can rightly and satisfactorily be undertaken by a lesser body? Surely such a principle lies at the very heart of democracy. At all events, it is fundamental to the development and dignity of the human person." From John Molony's address to the Gang of 700, Australian National University, 25 August 1992

"The opposite of love is not hate: it is fear" Giles Pickford, Balgownie Hotel, 31 May 2002

ORIGINS

The idea of ATEM (previously the Australasian Institute of Tertiary Education Administrators - AITEA) first came to a man called Maurie Blank, Secretary of the Caulfield Institute of Technology in Melbourne (later Chisholm Institute and then subsumed into Monash University).

He was concerned that the middle ranking administrative staff of his and other institutions seemed to be regarded as servants of the kind that should never expect anything better. He, on the other hand, did not see them as lackeys, but as people who could make a genuine contribution to the central aims of the University – teaching and research – and that they could do that by excelling in their work. He was also concerned about the negative impact of isolation, which he had experienced himself during his early career as an academic in Townsville and Rockhampton. This isolation, prevalent in small regional institutions and exacerbated by inter-institutional rivalries in the big cities, stunted the growth of ideas and the development of skills.

In 1974 Maurie Blank set about forming the Australian Institute of College Administration which changed to AITEA when it spread from the Institutes of Technology and the Colleges of Advanced Education to the Universities on 30 April 1976^2.

Maurie Blank collaborated with Don Patterson, Academic Registrar at the Canberra College of Advanced Education (now the University of Canberra), Colin Plowman of the Australian National University, Ding Bell and his Deputy Paul Morgan at the University of Melbourne, Dan Dunn at the University of Western Australia and others, to form an organisation which would empower these staff to get up and look after their collective futures by giving the older...
ones among them the opportunity to form the minds of the younger ones, and thus become a Guild where skills and perceptions were created and maintained.

Whenever a new idea is born, there is invariably intense opposition to it from people of a different cloth.

Blank’s idea was opposed by various people, prominent among whom were the Deputy Registrar of the University of Sydney and Monash’s Academic Registrar. They were fearful of it. They thought that the junior staff should get on with their work, keep their heads down, do what they were told, and should not be encouraged to get ideas above their station. They also opposed the idea of the Colleges and Institutes of Technology being included, notwithstanding the fact that it was this sector that had thought of the idea in the first place. The thought processes involved in such distorted reasoning stand condemned today, as all the institutions concerned are now universities.

Maurie Blank’s idea was founded in love, which, like hate, is always characterised by an intense focus on ‘the other’. Whereas the unequal and opposite reaction is founded in fear, which is always characterised by a sharp focus on ‘self’. Fear, not hate, is indeed the opposite of love.

Blank’s idea was also founded solidly on the Principle of Subsidiarity as explained by Emeritus Professor John Molony in the opening quote. The reaction against it was not founded on any principle, but on the instinct to preserve rights, privileges, territory, and mastery.

The desire to set a young apprentice free into the world of work is an act of love. The desire to control one is an act of fear. Therefore Maurie Blank’s idea was always going to prevail, and indeed it did.

AS IT IS NOW

We should now look at the structure of ATEM, 31 years after it was conceived in a Melbourne Polytechnic, and 29 years after its formation.

At this time it has Branches in all the States and Territories of Australia and in New Zealand, and it hopes to develop Branches in South-East Asia and the Pacific.
A diagram of its structure is shown below. **underlined items** indicate ATEM’s core business functions.

The diagram is entirely misleading in one respect because it makes ATEM look like a hierarchy. ATEM is not a hierarchy. It is in fact a federation of anarchies. The diagram makes it look as though the ATEM Council is the head of a body. In fact the ATEM Council is more like a meeting place where many interactions take place and things are resolved, or deferred, depending on these interactions. Therefore, the ATEM Council is more like a synapse than a head.

The Head of ATEM is the Branches. As there are nine of them, ATEM can be seen to be many headed, like a hydra. It is indeed a mythical beast. Any management scientist would
tell you that such an organisation could not possibly function. They said the same thing about
the University of Cambridge, and were wrong then as well.

All universities are places where young aspiring minds merge with older wiser minds to study
the higher orders of human activity. So it is with ATEM.

*It is the apprentices that matter (the young aspiring minds) because the future belongs to
them. By the time a person has reached the zenith of their power, they are already more
or less irrelevant: because the future is being re-invented by younger people beneath
them in the organisation. These are the people for whom ATEM was created.*

**Continuous Professional Development**

I should at this point tell you about the latest and biggest change to ATEM since 2000.

ATEM has introduced new grades of membership. To reach and maintain the upper levels it
is now essential that the member can demonstrate that they are engaged in continuous
professional education and training. The levels are:

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<tr>
<td>Student Member</td>
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<td>Member</td>
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<td>Associate Fellow</td>
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<td>Fellow</td>
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<td>Honorary Fellow</td>
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The two levels of Associate Fellow and Fellow are subject to a random audit by Branch
Committees which will ensure that the member has undertaken the minimum of 30 hours of
continuous professional education and training in each year.

**AS IT MAY BE**

The future of ATEM is hard to predict, because the organism is alive and therefore has a mind
of its own. However, I will throw caution to the winds and attempt it.

In 2076, one hundred years after its formation in Melbourne, ATEM will have around 8,000
members (currently we have around 1,500). They will be scattered across Branches in all
parts of Australasia, South-East Asia and the Pacific. The reason for this is that ATEM is not
a geographical entity. It is not like the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee, or the
National Tertiary Education Union, or the Australian Union of Students. It is based on people,
not geography. Therefore, in today’s world, that inevitably means that it has global
tendencies.

In 2076 ATEM’s award of ‘Membership’ for the young aspiring minds, and ‘Fellowship’ or
‘Associate Fellowship’ for the older, wiser minds, will be eagerly sought. Because, by then,
the agencies that manage tertiary education will notice its intrinsic value, and make the award
one of the factors taken into consideration for promotion within the ranks.

The ATEM Journal, the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, will have
around 20,000 subscribers all over the world. Even now it has twice as many readers as there
are members of ATEM. As time goes on it will be compulsory reading for tertiary managers everywhere.

The 100th Annual Conference will return to Melbourne in 2076 and a bust of Maurie Blank will be unveiled by the Chancellor in the grounds of the Caulfield Campus of Monash University to commemorate our 100th anniversary. The Conference will attract 1,000 delegates.

The ATEM Secretariat, part of ATEM’s Synapse, will still be housed in the Australian National University in Canberra and it will have a full-time staff of three, assisted by 20 ATEM Ghosts (retired members). The full-time positions will be Executive Officer, Finance Officer and Web Wizard. The Ghosts will be involved in special projects internationally, many of them being situated out in the Branches: which will affectionately be called ‘Head Offices’.

And finally, people will notice that ATEM is incorporated in Canberra, its web server was situated in Newcastle and then in Melbourne, and its Bank account is in Adelaide. They will wonder why. Not knowing that these things indicate ATEM’s peripatetic origins, when, like a nomad, it hunted and gathered across the savannas of tertiary education in the prehistory of our profession.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Maurie Blank, Don Patterson and Colin Plowman, who assisted me to develop this article. They were there at the birth, I was not. Maree Conway’s 1994 article helped me understand the historical truths.

1. The principle can be found in Pope Pius XI’s Quadragesimo Anno, 1931.
3. I thank Stephen Murby, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Swinburne University of Technology for the idea that the university is ‘a place where young aspiring minds merge with wiser minds to study the higher orders of human activity.’
4. In fact the creation of this sculpture by Jan Brown, Sculptor Emeritus at the Australian National University, is now under way and it will probably be shown for the first time at ATEM’s 30th Anniversary Conference in Sydney 2006, before finding its home at Monash’s Caulfield Campus.

First presented to the Annual Conference of the New Zealand Branch of ATEM, 4 July 2002, University of Otago, Dunedin. Giles Pickford is an ATEM Ghost who works in the ATEM Secretariat - giles.pickford@bigpond.com