

A DIFFERENT SORT OF UNIVERSITY: how an old dog learnt new tricks
Prof Roger Scott

CHRISTMAS QUIZ QUESTION: What does an aged public administration academic do when he is at a loss for words about Australian politics?

ANSWER: Join the Monty Python Flying Circus: sign on to the University of the Third Age and teach "something completely different."

A few months ago, I surprised myself by dodging an invitation for a radio interview to talk about Queensland politics. I no longer felt close enough to what was going on in Queensland to offer any reliable commentary. I happily vacated this small field to people who were younger or better connected than me.

I took this decision secure in the knowledge that I was already deeply entrenched with a different sort of educational institution. Courses at the University of the Third Age (U3A) range across a wide spectrum, from pure entertainment to the equivalent of postgraduate seminars.

I look back on my time in "real universities" with sadness. It is a tough time for my former colleagues in tertiary institutions, unless they are tucked in near the top end with lifetime tenure and a free choice about the balance between their scholarly activities. COVID-19 has magnified management challenges already created by an unsympathetic federal government. It is also hard for committed teachers, especially the young facing the uncertainty of fractional appointments.

Life has been much more satisfying since I was approved by the assessment committee two years ago to be admitted as a U3A Tutor, a (non) pay grade I last occupied in Tasmania in 1959.

The University of the Third Age is an international institution started in 1973 in France, where its activities remain closely integrated into the state university system. A decade later, the British version was changed by people like Peter Haslett and Michael Young into something more akin to the old Workers' Educational Association of the Fabians – unlike the French, no formal qualifications are issued and there is a stronger focus on peer learning.

Predictably, Australia soon followed the lead of the 'mother country'. Brisbane's U3A is part of a state network incorporating smaller-scale activities in suburbs and country towns, all based on a self-funding model which covers operating overheads with modest fees. There is an over-arching link between the state bodies and the international parent body.

The total Brisbane enrolment of roughly 4000 students can study just about anything: introductory and advanced classes in chess; cryptic crossword solving and bridge; computer skills; needlework; performing and appreciating music or art, tai chi, aquarobics. Also on offer is a dazzling array of foreign languages and literature, including medieval Latin and detailed study of Dante. History, applied science, economics and current affairs also attract large classes.

U3A offers courses taught by volunteers to anyone aged over 55, not necessarily fully retired, and presumes no previous education qualifications. (In practice, a large percentage of my largest class of 40 are graduates and several hold postgraduate qualifications and teaching experience in tertiary institutions. All sorts of unexpected people turn up.)

The Brisbane branch functions in a series of small rooms in the city centre – some owned by U3A at ground level (after a judicious property acquisition during the last economic slump) and others rented nearby on the fifth floor of an old Commonwealth Government building. Both places are well served by public transport

arteries. In normal circumstances, nearby coffee shops do a roaring trade before and between classes.

But 2020 has scarcely been normal. These locations posed particular problems in Brisbane's blessedly brief experience of COVID-19 restrictions. In the seemingly distant pre-Covid past, lifts would be crowded with 20 people, there would be a bustling throng in the lobby and the minimal fees were extracted from queues before each session (and legal currency could be tendered!). Enrolments were limited by the maximum number of chairs in the room.

After our class on Friday March 13, all this changed, as so much else did in Brisbane. All classes moved to Zoom or went into suspension. Now normal transmission has been resumed by U3A, albeit in an altered state. Under the current guidelines our larger class can no longer fit into its old room and so, thankfully, we have continued to Zoom and intend to do so in the future. This change allows us to better accommodate the frail aged amongst us (including the teachers!). Students into their nineties, predictably technophobic, have become enthusiastic Zoom users.

Zooming has unanticipated advantages apart from the obvious benefit of not requiring travel. And the removal of geographic limits meant our classes could include emigres from Brisbane in Longreach, Tasmania, and inland Victoria.

Both tutors and students get to know their class members better – instead of facing anonymous backs of heads, each person can see a panoramic view of faces with names attached and there is a set routine for participating in discussion.

I first tried U3A as a customer, exposed to a variety of styles and cherishing in particular a small class on medieval Britain, complete with illustrative artefacts.

But what could I teach? What topic would not drive me to the despair of knowing I was out of touch with the current trends in

public policy and educational administration – and getting rapidly more so?

In Pythonesque language, I needed “something completely different”. I went back in time – not quite to a misspent youth but to my postgraduate years of research and early career in African studies, inspired by the events there during 1960. The passage of time meant that my “Political Science” label could be rebranded as History.

This “Africanism” had stood me in good stead until I made a much-contested move from the Canberra CAE to the Story Chair at the University of Queensland in 1977, drawing on my proximity to the Whitlam years to embrace public administration. I conceded the African studies area to the sitting tenant, a Reader with considerable years of seniority.

It has been enormously stimulating to be back in African studies. Our approach to teaching has evolved into the two strands which exemplify most of the 300 courses on the books of Brisbane U3A.

There are two categories of teaching styles:

1. “the tutor as expert”, delivering scholarly entertainment to those with little background but considerable interest;
2. “the tutor as convenor”, functioning as part of a peer group whose members have significant prior skills in either pedagogy or relevant experience or both.

Classes in the first category have a relatively constant flow of members as curiosities are satisfied. Classes in the second category can have an almost static membership as peer researchers focus on an expanding range of topics within their discipline.

When individual class sizes were constricted by room size pre-Covid, some angst could be created among newcomers whose taste for the subject had been whetted at level (1) without hope of entering the closed shop of level (2). (Echoes here of life back in universities?)

The inevitable research literature about the British-style system of U3A has even generated its own analytical category for the second teaching style – the amazingly ugly neologism of the “geriagogic” model.

My wife and I share tutoring, with Ann supplying all the technical know-how for Zooming and Powerpointing, as well as drawing on family archives from missionaries and colonial administrators to teach in our “expert” description of 19th century Africa. The four courses on the 20th Century see us in full flow as “geriagogues” – for example, our current course on southern Africa includes contributions from a UQ Honorary Professor holding a joint appointment with Capetown University.

In circumstances like these, we are still early learners. Great satisfaction can be derived from researching and delivering our own contributions. Or witnessing the enthusiasm of our fellow-students throwing themselves into making their own contributions, often after half a century of absence from serious study.

So much has happened since I left African studies in 1972 that the Poirot grey cells are in a constant state of agitation: “Black Lives Matter”, “Rhodes must Fall”, reparations have been paid both to African victims of the British response to Mau Mau and, incongruously, to generations of British owners of Caribbean slaves – but not to the slaves’ descendants.

And who knew that the First Fleet was almost directed by a British Commons committee to Walvis Bay, that Cubans participated in South Africa’s armed struggle, that there was a racist assumption until the 1970s that the monumental ruins of Great Zimbabwe could not have been created by Africans? Who can remember what good things Malcolm Fraser was doing for South African advancement when he mysteriously lost his trousers?

The ringmaster of Monty Python's Flying Circus got it right – it was time to try something completely different. We could no longer fly, but we could Zoom. Tutoring in U3A beats the hell out of being forced to comment seriously about all that we read in *The Australian* and *The Courier-Mail*. I am no longer at a loss for words.

December 2020

Roger Scott was inaugural Executive Director of the TJ Ryan Foundation. He became Professor Emeritus at the University of Queensland in 1987. He then led the Canberra College of Advanced Education through the torturous process of becoming the University of Canberra, served as Director-General of Education in Queensland in the Goss era, also as the terminal Dean of Arts at QUT, and finally in part-time roles in public administration at QUT and back at UQ.