Old(er) Academic Meets the New University Environment

As an academic, like most academics, I have a respect for language. I am also interested in its use, as evidenced by my articles on ambiguity in economic and organization science on this website. That is not to say that I always treat language with the respect it deserves, I am probably as guilty of dangling my participles and splitting my infinitives as the next person. But these errors are unintentional and incidental, I do think that universities should encourage the proper use of language as a prerequisite for communication and debate in the pursuit of objectivity, most certainly within university walls.

So when I read an article in a university newsletter Summer 2006 about "*New Environments, New Ways of Working*" ("new" is good, "new" is positive"), it was the use of language that really struck me. The article was by a member of the university's Estates department and it starts:

> "*As everyone who has put in a request for office space in the University knows, space is at a premium – but not because we don't have it … it is our unsustainable use of space that limits our growth and development. Estates Management has been working to implement a new approach to space that better reflects modern ways of working including use of technology*"

So far so good - "unsustainable" bad, "modern" and "new" good. But the article then goes on to describe the new university environment as a cross between an open-plan advertising agency "*with a welcoming reception environment to make the right impression on visitors*", and an American football team's locker room with reference to - "*touchdowns"…"team working*" … "*single large team*" *and* "*onside*". It does mention collaborative work but that would do nothing for academics like me who collaborate with colleagues who may not be in the same university or even in the same country.

Here are some other vignettes from the article.

> "*At the present time, many staff are accommodated in individual cell offices …*".

The use of the term "cell" is a master stoke. We don't talk of "cell" bedrooms or "cell" toilets so why talk of "cell" offices? Could it be because single "cells" are what hermits, monks and prisoners have, and that wanting a "cell" cannot be seen as consistent with a desire (or fitness) to participate in normal society? So I Googled "cell offices" and immediately came up with a Swedish thesis http://www.diva-portal.org/kth/theses/abstract.xsql?dbid=472 which found that "cell offices" scored highest in terms of occupants' satisfaction with the environment, job satisfaction, and employee health. Alternative office formats such as those being promoted here (e.g. open plan) ranked lower on these measures. It's the empirical evidence, stupid. But that seems to have been overlooked here. Or maybe it is not the priority.

> "*… and many of these spaces remain empty during the day as people attend meetings or conferences, teach classes or conduct research elsewhere.*"

It's called normal academic work. Many capital assets, from bedrooms to bus shelters do not operate to full capacity during the day. Any suggestions for them?

> *"By reorganising workspace, solitude and quiet time can continue to be effectively supported"*

So I put; solitude +"effectively supported" into Google and the first page of hits included (a) a conference on help for grieving and bereaved people (b) pupils with special educational needs (c) a handbook from the Order of St Francis and (d) an article about 17th Century female hermits (hermitesses) in Tibet. Maybe academics craving quiet times just to be able to think will have to book a "cell" for their "effectively supported" periods of "solitude", the poor things.

> *"Flexible reorganisation of space provides the luxury of breakout spaces for information and display, informal meetings or socialising , or individual non-computer based working"*

Note what constitutes a "luxury". It seems that "individual non-computer based working" is now a "luxury" for an academic. Silly me, I thought that was a necessity.

> *"Good quality wireless workspace is of central importance … "*

Sounds nice, but surely my desktop PC is more important, where will my desktop PC go? … oh I <u>see</u>!

> *"Support Staff share a large area together and academic staff are not cut off behind closed doors. The use of glass walls has not only brought light into an otherwise dark area but encourages all staff to see themselves as part of a single large team".*

"Lets see, are we all here – John Maynard Keynes, Adam Smith, Alfred Marshall, Joseph Schumpeter, - great, glad you could make it our Bookable Secluded Area 33b, just stick your Blackberries on the shelf and grab a bean bag … say, guys, to be honest, it's the collaborative thing. None of you seem to be buying into it. Books, monographs, solo-authored tomes – look guys, you are all getting a reputation for not being team players, know what I mean?

> *"The previous approach to office space is no longer affordable or sustainable…"*

… and by implication the new approach is of course both "affordable" and "sustainable". "Sustainable" is of course good, sustainable is green, sustainable is eco-friendly. I Googled "sustainable" and the first page of hits came up with, amongst other things, sustainable communities, sustainable development (five times), the well being of future generations, green dream jobs, renewable energy, progressive investors, community energy and eco travel. Being against "sustainable" is like being against saving the whale

and organic farming and the use of the word helps moderate the use of "affordable" (i.e. cheap). Now where did I put my sandals and that tin of soya beans…

> *"The 'departments of the future' start with a welcoming reception environment to make the right impression on visitors"*

But if space is at a premium and affordability is the issue, why a "*welcoming*" (.e. expensive) reception environment for "*visitors*" (who they, and what for?) when those who actually use the departmental space will be academics, students and administrators who do not need "welcoming" but just crave the peace and quiet to get on with the job?

> *"… open plan areas will be supported by bookable and non-bookable areas for when confidentiality or privacy is required".*

Again, that word "supported". Note how it is open plan that is presented as the dominant concept, "supported" by private areas "as required". So privacy is now an added-on "supported" (and by implication, non-routine) activity.

The article quotes a departmental head who has had his department converted along the lines suggested in the article.

> *"We have had to moderate how we do things. There is less room for bookshelves, forcing us to be more discriminating on what materials we have in our offices. There is less teaching accommodation, but what we have is more flexible and more appropriate for the diverse styles of teaching demanded in a modern environment. There are more quality meeting rooms and areas for both business and social purposes"*

"OK John Maynard, sorry you should have known there was no room for your collected works here, you'll have to take it down to Secure Storage 44c. Adam, remember your next workshop is in Complex 72g – make sure you don't miss your bus. Joseph, you are greeting our sponsors at 11 at Bookable Meeting Room 33d. And guys - you do remember about the TGIF bonding session in Designated Non-bookable Social Area 25f tonight don't you…. Alfred could you get the munchies for that?

The article concludes:

> *"(Estates Management) hope to bring staff onside with their vision "*

Note the use of language. Estates Management are clearly "onside" and "hope" to "bring" staff "onside" as well to share their "vision". My Oxford dictionary defines "onside" as "in a position where a player may lawfully play the ball, not offside". It defines "offside" as "on the wrong side, out of favour". And who would want to play unlawfully, be on the wrong side or be out of favour?

Well, me for one.