

Dazzled by Tech: Robotic Universities, Googlification and Microsoft

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Theme: [Intelligence](#)

The mechanical, robotic striving of university politburos and their jack boot managers have always been interesting when it comes to one particular topic: the role of technology and its adoption. For it is in technology that the mediocre paper clip shuffler can claim to have achieved something – on someone else’s back, naturally.

The shift to Google by universities as a storage and communication mechanism was something taken with a breezy obliviousness to its implications. For Google, it was a magical boon: mass concentration of staff and student data, cloud facilities, the magic of information. Such decisions are generally taken without asking the staff who actually use it – the nature of university management is piously anti-democratic, with all the usual balloons of sentiment about faux consultation and the like.

Google’s move into the university sector with a mixture of predatory zeal and seductive wooing was inexorable, mimicking the cyber colonisation drive of Steve Jobs at Apple (“computers are bicycles for the mind”).

In schools, Google has built a relentless, unquestioned empire, taking root in such systems as Chicago Public Schools, the third largest school district in the United States. As the [New York Times](#) noted in May 2017, such an event heralded “the Googlification of the classroom.” Teachers became Google grunts advertising products to other schools, bypassing school district officials. Students became Google converts, effectively disabled from considering any alternatives and indifferent to pure knowledge. They have become the new worker bees.

University managers were tickled and thrilled by the jargon, the applications, the idea of productivity, [sending out](#) such messages to staff as follows:

“The College is Going Google! What does this mean? How will it impact teaching and learning at The College? Many K-12 school districts are using Google Apps for Education, providing their students with access to Google productivity tools as early as primary school. Students coming to The College in the next five years may never have opened Microsoft Word, but will be familiar with the sharing, collaborating, and publishing with Google tools. Are you ready?”

Such gush and wobbly prose characterised the nature of such unwanted missives. (Most staff, at least the sentient ones, could not have cared less.) And Google was certainly winning over its competitors, most notably Microsoft. In 2011, it scored the coup of coups by netting University of California at Berkeley.

The Californian giant displayed those usual budgetary considerations typical of such decisions: Google, for one, was cheaper and easier on the bottom line. Office 365 would [also require](#) the initial installation and configuration of local software as a preliminary for any migration to be effectuated.

“Office 365 offers an integrated experience for on-premise and cloud users,” went the [explanatory document](#) comparing Google and Office 365. “This comes at a greater ongoing, operational expense and complexity of maintaining central infrastructure.”

Google, on the other hand, would be able to do amply more with significantly less – and at goggle eyed speed.

“A UC Berkeley migration to Google [from CalMail] can start faster and with less infrastructure investment.”

But some universities, after conducting their whirlwind Google romance, soured over the giant company. UC Berkeley students and alumni contended in a [law suit](#) in 2016 that Google had given the false impression that email accounts would not be scanned for commercial purposes.

In 2015, Macquarie University [reconsidered](#) a move it undertook in 2010 to migrate some 6,000 staff from its Novell GroupWise to Gmail. Students had already commenced using Gmail in late 2007.

Again, as with UC Berkeley, it is worth scrutinising why the university initially decided to go with Google over Microsoft, that ever contending beast in the tech boardroom. The reasons are crusty as they are old:

“The university rejected Microsoft as an option at the time,” explained Allie Coyne in [ITNews](#), “for being too expensive.”

Being careful to market such economic reasons appropriately, the Macquarie public relations unit was keen to emphasise that the university had only gone with Google after being reassured that generated data would be hosted in the European Union. With data protections being more securely moored in the EU, this was a consideration decorated to sell. To have hosted it in the US would have naturally brought the US Patriot Act and Digital Millennium Copyright Act into play.

With a change in hosting policy on the part of Google, Macquarie found itself veering into the arms of Microsoft and Office 365. That company had, it so happened, opened two Australian data centres in 2014, a point that alleviated the infrastructure impediments that bothered the paladins at UC Berkeley.

The move to Office 365 is simply exchanging one demon’s credentials for another, and the rosy line being parroted by university management must be unpacked with diligence. The example offered by RMIT University, for instance, in abandoning Google is fittingly opportunistic, with one email circulated amongst staff finally revealing why one of Australia’s largest teaching institutions is moving to Office 365:

“RMIT strategic vision is to expand into China. Google is NOT supported in China.”

A truly mercantilist sentiment.

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