

Measuring the Darkness:

Learning as Potholing, becoming lost, and finding new spaces

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'Metrics that matter: future directions for qualitative and quantitative institutional research'

- Conference title
- Questions
 - Do metrics matter?
 - Why so?
 - What is the drive behind metrics?
 - What are the assumptions behind metrics?
 - Are there educational matters that matter that lie beyond metrics?
 - Or is it just a matter of being 'smarter' with metrics, of getting the research methods right?

Themes for my talk

- The very meaning of ‘higher education’
 - and ‘university’
- Explicitness
 - and that which is never explicit
- Control
 - and letting go
- A pedagogy of risk
 - and of strangeness
- Imagination
- Darkness and light

Metrics – their pernicious presupposition

- In the management of public services ('new public management'), all has to be measured
- 'Give us your metric', is the cry
 - And this thinking has come into higher education
- Only if it is susceptible of measurement can a policy or even a value carry any weight.
- This is not without value but as a total ideology, it is pernicious
 - For much that is of value in higher education may be beyond measurement
 - And to 'drive forward' metrics-based policies may be injurious therefore to much that we characteristically value in higher education.

What is 'higher education'?

- As it has evolved over the centuries, particularly over the past 200 years, higher education has become associated with the development of mind
- The student – not an empty vessel but an active engaging person
- Newman spoke of a 'philosophical outlook'
- An expansion of mind
- Not just cognitive change
- But a change in the student as a person
- 'Being here has changed my life'.

On being critical

- A fundamental axiom of Western higher education that it develop students' critical thinking
- This axiom is threatened
 - Texas Republican Party
 - Japan and humanities – of little value to the economy (as shown in metrics)
 - UK - employment 'metrics'
 - 'Student satisfaction' scores (metrics)
 - But also, critical thinking is about being critical and having the courage to act critically (Teinemann Square, Hong Kong, Turkey, Chile)

What is meant by ‘university’?

- The idea of ‘university’ points to a space in society for disinterested thought and action
- - or at least thought and action governed by the better point of view
- - tested through diligent inquiry and critical dialogue
- Note ‘and action’ – this is new.
- The university is now entangled with society – social and public spheres.
- It has new spaces to engage with those wider spheres and is doing so.

Measuring – and not measuring

- The performance indicators multiply
- To research income is added RE scores, h index, i10 index, journal scores, citation indices ...
 - But what of eg a scholarly culture, research and scholarly care/ values,
- A concern with the public sphere
- Learning analytics
- Can thinking be measured?
- Should it be measured?
- When does measurement become ‘biopower’ and ‘surveillance’?

On making explicit and on measuring

- Thinking is essentially private
- The drive to explicitness affects thinking
 - From the interior to the exterior
- Self-censure
- Playing safe
- Working within paradigms and framework
- Risk-averseness
- This is sheer perniciousness – affects what it is to be a university
 - Affects state-university relationship

On darkness

- There is dark matter in universities
- Not a value-judgement
- Essential
- Hiddenness – even to the thinker
- Ideology yes
- But creative potential
- Bringing into consciousness that which is dark, lurking
- Calling subversive thoughts into being

Learning as potholing

- Encouraging students to go into their own space
- Not knowing where things might lead
- Feeling a cognitive darkness, burrowing through a narrow space
- Unclear where to go
- A struggle
- Possibly emerging into a large open space
- Even sunlit.
- Learning as potholing.

On education liberation – and the poverty of measurement

- *‘I’ve always had a huge passion for languages. But coming to [x university], I found the French and the Italian departments very different, and I did start to feel a bit bitter towards French. I wasn’t enjoying that any more. I loved it at school more than Italian. I found the French department very rigid ... I did feel like I was back in school, but not in the sixth form ... I didn’t feel very free to express myself in the lessons. With the Italian department, we all sit around a big table or chairs without tables in front. There would be a lot more interaction ... It was more friendly, just a liberating atmosphere.’*
- *Implications? The poverty of Quality evaluation*
- *Curriculum? Pedagogy? Becoming a (21st) century student?*

Pedagogical risk and strangeness

- A letting go but within limits, boundaries
- Encouraging students to strike out on their own
- A pedagogy of risk
 - Problem of ‘learning outcomes’
- A pedagogy of strangeness
- To bring students into strange and unsettling spaces
 - Problem of ‘student satisfaction’
 - And of ‘trigger warnings’

On scariness – and finding new spaces

‘(beginning the student journey) is [an entry into] a scary, exciting and fascinating world ... We need ... self-belief to survive and prosper ... I remember thinking ... this is amazing, exciting, exhilarating and downright terrifying ... Working with a complex world is ... about ... not giving up when you feel overwhelmed ...’

‘... What’s fascinating about Alison’s courses is the amount of panic, you know, that surrounds the essays and I felt it personally ... It was a very, very scary thing to do because ... there were no right answers.’

The value of darkness – and its measurement

- Darkness – hidden, out of sight
- Troubling
- Calling for resolution or at least accommodation
- Not just a cognitive resolution – but a resolution in one's being
- Coming into another place
 - Exercising one's own imagination, to see something anew for oneself
- What would it mean to measure this? To what end?
- It would be seen as a predictor of dissatisfaction? Of non-completion? Of learning ill-health?

‘Research’

– and scholarly implications

- Openings for new kinds of empirical research, theoretically informed
- Cross frameworks (socio-materialism; phenomenology; actor-network theory ...)
 - In the context of the real structures (audit, measurement, the enhancement of cognitive capital) that are at work
- But problem – an opening up of that that deserves to remain hidden
- Great care needed
- Possible mis-use of such research
- But certainly openings for much-needed scholarly research ...

Conclusions

- Not all can be or should be made transparent, explicit
- Indeed, there is educational value in the hidden
 - And even in darkness
- As learners are given the space and encouragement to come through their own challenges
 - Even to lose themselves - and to worry a little
 - And to find their own way through
- Measurement can impair this educational darkness
 - But that's not to say we should ignore it
- To the contrary, we need to take it more seriously;
 - and to accord it pedagogical space
- And to inquire into it.



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