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Recasting General Education: A Curriculum for Turbulent Times

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Education amid change

- Global knowledge economy
- World competitiveness
- But also societal change
- Demands express themselves on institutions in the form of
 - Equal opportunities
 - Knowledge innovation
 - Employability demands – but very fluid patterns of graduate employment
 - Social cohesion
 - Living with uncertainty

Huge Challenges on the Curriculum

- What is that students should learn (against this background)
- Sense that education should concern itself with the world
- But not clear how
- The ‘big ditch’ – particularity v universality
- Students as persons and as members of humanity
- Sense that particularity is inadequate; but quite unclear what universality might mean.

Horizons

- Last two hundred years
- Two mantras
 - Knowledge, knowledge, knowledge
 - Skills, skills, skills
- But now a sense that neither are sufficient as a way of shaping a curriculum in education
 - I may not use them, I may use them unwisely, they may become redundant – they are inert in themselves.

A global knowledge economy

- Several dimensions
 - Knowledge
 - Economy
 - Global
 - Interconnectedness
 - Persistent change

So back to knowledge?

- ‘Bringing knowledge back in’??
- The sacred disciplines?
- But sense that fragmented knowledges are insufficient for an interconnected world
- NB: being a chief executive of a petroleum company – faced with an oil-spill
 - *One may have been ‘trained’ as a petroleum engineer but becomes a diplomat, with a public voice, having regard to the general interest with a global reach*

Apparent options

1 'General' skills:

- *Occupational skills having a general applicability (IT skills; language skills)*
- *General (transferable) skills (eg communication skills ...)*
- *Critical thinking skills*

2 Core curriculum

- *Great themes – of history/ civilisation/values/ citizenship*
- *Science for humanities students/ humanities for sc students (breadth)*

3 Practice-based education: linking practice with education (skills and knowledge)

4 General 'attributes'

- *Dispositions/ virtues for the world (criticality/ scepticism/ enquiring mind ..)*

What is that we want?

- A hope that education can help to develop students as future members of society
- As such, neither knowledge nor skills are sufficient
- Human beings are not merely possessors of knowledge or skills but are beings, they have being in the world
- They engage with the world; they have 'being' in the world
- They have dispositions to do so, with their own intentions/ hold on world

NB: *the matter of general education is a contested territory.* Not simply a technical matter but differences of values and ends ('economy'/ 'public good'/ 'authenticity' – liberty/ justice/ community ...)

Dispositions for a changing world

- A will to learn
- A will to engage
- A preparedness to listen
- A preparedness to explore
- A willingness to hold oneself open to experiences
- A determination to keep going forward

But the student is developing his/her own qualities

- Carefulness
- Courage
- Resilience
- Self-discipline
- Integrity
- Restraint
- Respect for others
- Openness
- Criticality
- Creativity

Dispositions and qualities compared

- The dispositions are necessary; the qualities have a degree of optionality in them
- Hence, just a few dispositions; but many qualities
- The dispositions enable one to go forward
- The qualities colour that forward movement; give it 'character'

Summary

- Historically, education has been an education within channels – supplying particular lines of student development
 - Knowledge
 - Action
 - Being
- All within particular disciplines
- A sense arises that such a silo approach is insufficient in an interconnected age
- *A capacity to transcend frameworks is required*
- Hence the call for generality
- And so generality takes the forms of generality in
 - Knowledge
 - Action
 - Being
 - Or in some combination of these

A messy situation!

- This is a messy situation
 - And *necessarily so*
- It is giving rise to some ideas that perhaps are not fully thought through, as hybrid proposals arise, eg:
 - Complexity skills
 - Learning to learn skills
 - Global citizenship
 - Wisdom
- These are all complexes of knowledge, action and being but are all too often reduced to skills or knowledge.

Traps for the unwary

- The educationalists focus on knowledge gambits (core/ general/ ID)
- And the state/ corporate sector/ newer universities focus on skills (transferable/ core)
- But being effective in a changing and challenging world calls for students to develop as human beings with certain dispositions
- ie, their being as such
- Through their being, students can come to take on the world!

So just focus on the dispositions?

- No!
- The dispositions are engendered through the disciplines
- The disciplines encourage the formation of ‘epistemic virtues’
- - and a whole range of skills as well
- But the dispositions are not to be taken for granted; they are fragile
- So ‘general education’ becomes a catch-all term for a complex of curricula hopes/ aspirations/ challenges
 - of dispositions/ knowing/ acting
 - But placed against the broadest horizons, beyond the confines of singular disciplines or context-specific skills

The value of ‘disciplines’

- Dispositions cannot be developed in themselves
- They are developed thro tasks and in situations
- The disciplines are a vehicle for promoting the disciplines
- They offer the possibility of developing ‘epistemic virtues’
- Disciplines call for discipline
- *But the disciplines have their limitations*
 - Narrowness/ non-connectedness/ channelling experience
 - Hence the call from some for ‘critical interdisciplinarity’

Towards a general education for turbulent times

- Many elements
 - Disciplines/ fields
 - Curricula openness – multi-disciplinarity
 - Pedagogical spaciousness
 - Engagement with the world
 - Personal flourishing

Additional considerations

- Many worlds
- Many timeframes
- Many voices
 - (modes of communication)
- Many rationalities
- Many values
- Many forms of action
 - Wisdom

Lines of flight

- A general education, then, can take off in multiple directions;
- Multiple 'lines of flight', for
 - understanding
 - effective action/ engagement with the world
(despite its instability and contestability)
 - wisdom
 - communication
 - for doing/ making/ constructing

Glimpses of an ecological education

- Interconnectedness
- Global horizons
- Universality – liberty/ equality/ community ...
 - The big concepts ('threshold concepts') –
 - Foundational concepts?
- Wellbeing – amid instability (not just sustainability)
- Concern for the world
- Value-basis
- Engagement

Conclusions: A general education for turbulent times

- No blue-print
- Possibilities – multiple lines of flight
- Multiplicities among multiplicities
- But principles/ broad considerations
 - Of knowing/ action/ being – amid instability
- Glimpses of universality
 - - of interconnectedness
 - - of concerned and sceptical engagement
 - - and of spaciousness
- Requires a utopian imagination: will it be forthcoming?



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