Being a Student in an Age of Uncertainty

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Themes, territory, aims

Territory – knowing, being, world, wellbeing, learning

Themes
- Being a graduate, anywhere in the world
- Living in an uncertain world (of supercomplexity)
- A pedagogy of strangeness
- Inadequacy of knowledge and skills
- Learning to be
- An 'ecological' learning

- ie, a critique but a positive critique; a utopia but a feasible utopia
- + the voices of students.

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Beginning observations: living in a changing and expanding world

(1)

- Many students entering higher education today will be alive in the C22
- What kind of higher education is going to help them not merely survive but flourish into the next century
- And in such a way that they can help to improve the world?
- (For graduates will live globally in a global world)

(2)

- University ad in London underground:
- 'You can't predict the future but you can prepare for it'.

(3)

- Pretence at certainty ('lng outcomes', skills, students-as-customers, employability)

In the end, it's about being inspired

'*I had no … awareness of my own ability, so when you get an inspiring teacher that has faith in you, or helps you understand a topic then you know, it's amazing.*

You get excited … you want to go and know more about it, you want to find more … if a teacher inspires you in a subject then are you are going to a lot more attention, feel that drive to get involved in a way.'

'*I have always lacked self-confidence … You worry what other people think, and are they going to read this and completely disagree? … I was afraid of saying the wrong answer.*'

- Pedagogies of/ for confidence [in *all* universities]
  - Student anxiety is increasing?

Strange new world

- The world has always been changing – but now new features
- Speed of [technological + cognitive] change – digitization, surveillance
- Globalisation – with increasing interaction across the world and across cultures (the West & China)
- New interactive and open information and communication processes
- Institutional change
- Conceptual openness
- Environmental challenges – scientific, social, ethical
- A 'liquid world' (Bauman) – 'alternative facts'/ 'post-truth'
- Not merely complexity but also supercomplexity

The world no longer awaits its graduates

- Economic turbulence
- Relationship between university and the labour market even more unstable ('graduate jobs'?)
- Much talk of 'employability' but perhaps there should also be (some) talk of 'not-yet-in-employment' or 'from one employment to another'
- Graduates have to struggle to make their way in the world
- Temporary and PT employment; multiple employers; 'gig economy'
- Graduates continue to work at finding themselves; establishing their identity to and for themselves
- Students-as-customers – exerting their influence (– in Adelaide?)
- Open or closed? Welcoming or hostile? A world of ambivalence.

The linguist's tale

- 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? Curriculum? Pedagogy? Becoming a (21st) century student?*

Curricula responses

- Mantra of knowledge gave way to skills
- and skills have been continually differentiated
- But now, knowledge is coming back in
- But what kind of knowledge?
- General education – multidisciplinary?
- Knowledge in action – Mode 2
- Embodied knowledge – Mode 3?
- Knowledge in community?
- Multimodal 'knowledge'?

The lure of skills

- A knowledge economy calls not just for knowledge but for knowledge skills
- A mantra of 'skills, skills, skills' has arisen
- Occupational skills, transferable skills, personal skills, soft skills …
- This has been supported by a focus on 'outcomes' based curricula
- A higher education of 'performativity'.

Reflections

- Under contemporary conditions, the key themes that have come to sustain higher education are totally inadequate

- ie, the themes of knowledge and skills are not to be rubbished

- But they are totally inadequate

- My K and S may be redundant

- In situations, in life, it is not (merely) knowledge or skills that carry us forward but it is us as persons

- It is persons that choose to put knowledge or skills to use …

A pedagogy of strangeness

'*(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.'*

Components of an epistemological strangeness

- no right answers – openness, dispute
- journeying – beginning, continuing
- strangeness – scary, exhilarating
- complexity – options, choices, difficulties of making sense
- steadfastness – not giving up, keeping going
- self-monitoring, self-criticality, self-control
- personal possibilities
- inadequacy of 'student satisfaction'

Signs of learning to be

- So we glimpse here signs of a learning to be
- Through challenging encounters, the student not merely learns but learns to be, to be themselves
- They extend the boundaries of their own 'being-possible'
- Extraordinary feature of a genuine higher education
  - That it can change lives (not just career and so forth) but life itself.
    - How is this possible?

6 epistemological dispositions (virtues)

- A will to learn
- A preparedness to listen
- A preparedness to explore
- A will to evaluate and to act ('criticality')
- A willingness to hold oneself open to experiences
- A determination to keep going forward.

Qualities

eg:
- Carefulness
- Courage
- Resilience
- Self-discipline
- Integrity
- Restraint
- Respect for others
- Openness
- Imagination
- Creativity

etc, etc

Dispositions and Qualities compared

- The dispositions are necessary; the qualities have a degree of optionality to them
- The dispositions enable one to go forward – to acquire qualities and voice
- The qualities offer the possibility that a student will come to possess his/her own profile of qualities
- The qualities colour the student's movement forward, give it its own 'character' – literally so, to some degree, in theatre design.

The (higher) educational significance of the dispositions and qualities

- The dispositions and qualities are concomitants of a genuine higher education
- Curricula and pedagogies could nurture them
- But often fall short
- Students are denied curricula space, and pedagogical affirmation
- But the dispositions and qualities (above) are logically implied in a 'higher' education.

Engaging with strangeness

- We may just be in a position to solve the riddle: how is that higher education can transform individuals?

- A genuine higher education calls individuals out of themselves

- It asks that they confront strangeness – and complexity and ambivalence (*where there are no right answers*) - and give of themselves

- Nor merely give themselves up

- But engage with (difficult) strangeness.

Encouraging the dispositions and the student's own qualities

RB:	*You are writing an essay. You've done your research. You've more or less got an idea of what you want to say. You've got to perhaps argue for something, to develop a point of view. How does that feel … when you know this is probably quite original and it's you speaking?*

Student: *It's really exciting and at the same time you are thinking would anyone else agree with this. … In that way, sometimes it's safer to stick to the literary criticism .. And express the critic's point of view and put your own point forward against that.*

Towards an ecological learning

- The idea of the ecological
- Ecosystems of the university & of the graduate's life
- Economy yes, but also social institutions, persons, knowledge, learning, culture, natural environment
- Idea of deep ecology – implicatedness, & ecologies of intrinsic value
  - Worth repairing, and advancing/ strengthening
- ie, challenge is to see the university thro its entanglements with the world – and therefore students and their learning in that way
- Ecological learning – the whole of a person's learning, in and thro life (C22).

Pedagogical darkness

- Hidden dimensions
- Students in states of anxiety
- Places of darkness
- Not necessarily damaging
- Possibly resources
- Can we find ways that enable students to recognize and confront their own spaces of darkness?
- (cf lifewide learning)

Glimpsing an ecological curriculum

- Self-reflection
- Stretching – into the 7 ecosystems and across them
- Self and/in with/for the world
- Students as global citizens – a new 'networking'
- A care for the world
- Ethics
- Engagement – listening, action, being in the world
- 'Ecologies of practice' (Kemmis)
- Spaces of becoming
- Requires a pedagogy of risk.

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Conclusions

- The world is challenging
- Universities have a responsibility to face up to its challenges
- Mantras of knowledge or skills (or even both) inadequate
- Question is: how are we to be?
- Extraordinary thing: a higher education can help
- It contains its own transformatory potential – an ecological learning
- But its realisation requires not just hard imaginative thinking
  and even utopian thinking but also a will to change
    – to change us and to help the students to change
- Becoming a twenty-first century student cannot be left to chance
    - In both curricula and pedagogies.
- Much is being accomplished but there is much still to do.

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