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Re-thinking the Curriculum in the Twenty-first Century: Pitfalls and Possibilities

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This talk

- Analysis (of the world), commentary, and broad proposals
- Lots of gloom and doom
- Sense that universities have little space
- The world presses in
 - And even students are more demanding
- But: spaces for possibilities (in relation to curricula – and learning)
- Spaces for optimism
- But much hard work ahead.

The exam question

‘What is it to be educated in the C21?’

- that’s it. Nothing else.

The world of 2020

- Turbulence & risk
- Economic - crises
- Global inequalities
- Wars/ terrorism
- Environmental degradation
- Loss of biodiversity
- New technologies – giving rise to problems of living
- Care of the elderly and societal fragmentation

Universities amid change

- World competitiveness (and world rankings of institutions)
- Knowledge economy – ‘cognitive capitalism’
- But not just economic growth (‘innovation’)
 - But also societal change
- Demands express themselves on institutions in the form of
 - Equal opportunities
 - Knowledge transfer
 - The labour market
 - Increased volume of research, oriented towards societal problems
 - Institutional diversity – mission ‘specificity’/ ‘USPs’
 - Curriculum change in this context.

Curricula – are on a cusp

- Bewitched by all manner of seductions
- New technologies
- New managerial practices (eg learning analytics)
- Demands of the labour market ('employability')
- And nostrums ('value-for-money'; return on investment – loans)
- (and in a market-led situation) – students as 'customers'
- - who need to be 'satisfied'

My argument

- 1 Our world is unknowable in key respects (certainly the world of 2020)
 - a world of *contested ideas and practices*
- 2 But it is not an educational free-for-all;
 - in designing curricula today, it is still possible to work out a *universal* set of ideas – & indeed, *responsibilities*.
- 3 However, in shaping curricula, there are *traps for the unwary* (10 pitfalls)
- 4 & universities are often falling into them - either through omission or commission
- 5 Vision is needed; even *utopian vision*.
- 6 *My idea* of the curriculum – the ecological curriculum.

A world of supercomplexity

- Not just change
- Not just complexity
- Not even just complex change
- But of supercomplexity
- Distinguish complexity and supercomplexity
- Both are important – neither reducible to the other
 - What is it to be a doctor, an engineer, a computer scientist?
- There is a little recognition of complexity
- But nothing at all of supercomplexity

Inadequate mantras

- Knowledge, knowledge, knowledge
- Skills, skills, skills
- Employability, employability, employability

NB: a shift towards skills as such – and skills that lend themselves to the knowledge economy; and a placing of K in the world (a kind of ‘performativity’)

Problems:

- Neither my knowledge nor my skills may be adequate tomorrow;
- I may have all the knowledge or skills in the world but (a) I may not be inclined to use them; (b) if I do, I may use them inappropriately.
- The world may change even as I acquire my skills (so the world of work is unstable)
- There is a world beyond the world of work
 - (Many students entering higher education today will be alive in the C22.)

Four examples:

(1) Being a student

- What is it to be a student (in the C21)?
 - What do we expect of students – and what might they expect of themselves?
- To acquire skills, esp IT skills
- And to become entrepreneurial, to be innovative and to be successful?
- Or is it to come to have a care for the world
- To have empathy towards the world
- Or is it to be adept in handling complex situations – many disciplines, many voices, many perspectives?
- These are different readings as to what it is to be a student
- And ultimately they conflict, for they reflect different value positions.

Challenge – and prospering

*‘(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.’*

- Evident here – neither knowledge nor skills but being, being able to open oneself to a wider challenging world; and coming thro difficulty.
- A matter of the student’s being (in the world)

(2) The global classroom

- Many universities in the world draw their students from 100+ countries
- Issues of student-student engagement and of student-teacher relationship.
- Students arrive with their own ideas of teaching and learning – their own *pedagogical scripts*
- These will differ, both across students & between students and professors
- Matters of hierarchy, of independence, of criticality, of learning, and of understanding
- Gives rise to tensions, uncertainties, distance, low self-esteem,
- And the students band together in their own nationalities ...

Being a part of the multinational classroom

'...initiative is important, individuality, speaking out against anything and having a viewpoint is all important. But, aren't they actually associated with a particular aggressive colonial or capitalist culture? ... Isn't this an act of epistemic violence?'

(UK academic)

'I pay you this much. I am here, so teach me. They (the teachers) are kind of our servants ... we pay and they provide a service and they should provide it in the way we want.'

(UK PG student from Hong Kong)

(3) The use of digital technologies

- Now ubiquitous
- But how and to what extent?
 - And to what end?
- To be used as researchers and scholars use them?
- Or to foster IT skills for ‘the real world’?
- To develop students’ information handling skills?
- Are there pitfalls here?
- And are there wider educational possibilities that we have barely begun to glimpse?

(4) The pedagogical relationship

- What is to be the relationship between professor and student?
- Recently, a *shift from T to L*
- Is the professor still to be that of '*the sage on the stage*'?
- Or *facilitator* of learning experiences
- Or constructor of sure path to achieving stated '*learning outcomes*'
- Or a gate-opener into what it is *to create and innovate* in the disciplines?
- *And the student?*
- Independent? Learn anywhere, anytime? In control of their learning? ..

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.'*
- **Pedagogy is even more significant than curriculum?** The curriculum has to come alive; itself to be open; and to open pedagogical spaces.

A developing situation

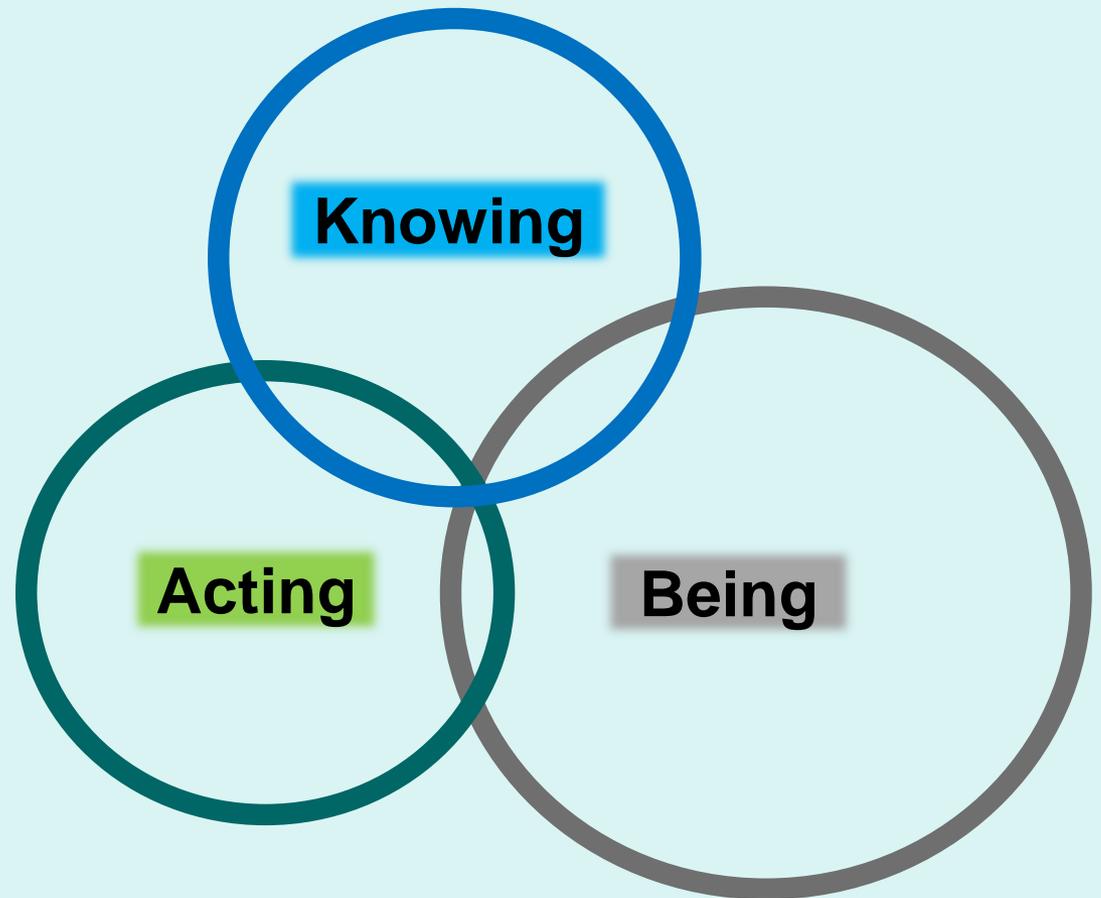
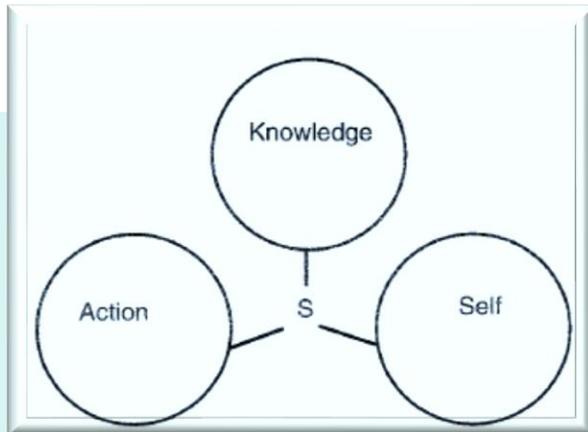
- Curriculum reform all over the world
- And – at the same time - new conceptions of L and T

Ten particular pitfalls

- 1 Technological fix (learning analytics)
- 2 Idea of global citizen – or global entrepreneur?
- 3 Learning outcomes
- 4 Digital learning (IT ‘skills’)
- 5 ‘Co-production’
- 6 Research-based learning
- 7 Tight management (of the teaching/learning functions of a university)
 - eg attrition rates, throughput
- 8 ‘Student satisfaction’
- 9 ‘Critical thinking’
- 10 ‘Employability’.

Commentary

- Not that we are using *technology* – but we are not using it imaginatively
- Not that we are using *managerial techniques* – but we do not possess a proper sense of university leadership
- Not that we haven't recognized that the world is *complex* – rather that we haven't recognized that it is supercomplex, with multiplying ideologies, perspectives, cultures, conflicting points of view ..
- *ie*, (in relation to curric and pedagogies) our thinking and our practices are *impoverished*
- And *falling well short* of the possibilities and responsibilities of the C21
- ***Curricula and pedagogy – spaces of control, of boundaries. A risk-free environment. Everybody is happy.***



6 Dispositions for a world of challenge

(Grad attributes and the like – just lists of skills. A different approach is needed.)

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

(Optional) qualities for a world of challenge

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

(Qs are extendable; & offer a palette of pathways to a worthwhile identity)

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.

- Challenges of encouraging independence, authenticity, criticality.
- A pedagogy of safety? Or a pedagogy of risk?

Curricula values for the C21

- Openness (across disciplines; across society)
- Criticality (levels/ domains – much more than problem-solving or even problem-identification in the here-and-now)
- Independence (students)
- Freedom (in curriculum design)
- (Full) human being – opening to the world
- Realization (of the possibilities of all life)

Possibilities for learning

- *Examination formats* that stretch the student into ‘strangeness?’
- *Value conflicts* (where there are ‘no right answers’)
- Seeing one’s studies in a broad *multidisciplinary context*
- The global classroom
- ‘The public philosopher’
- Being exposed to *situations that tax the student as a human being* in making choices
- - and in making *(authentic) evaluations*.
- NB: revolutionary and imaginative uses of IT.

The ecological university

- The university is entangled in *various ecosystems* of the world
- Economy yes, but also knowledge, learning, persons, social institutions, culture and the natural environment
- Each university will have its own possibilities in these *7 ecosystems*
- Adelaide will have its own possibilities
- What might be *its* possibilities?
- How can student learning be so shaped that it does more justice to the *ecological possibilities* in front of Adelaide?
- (Taking account of all of the resources of the university in relation to each of those *7 ecosystems*.)

The ecological curriculum

Promotes:

- Being in the world
- Sensitive to its *interconnectedness*
- Not inert but *engagement with the world*
 - in its sustainability and even its *improvement*
 - *critical being*
- A care for the world
- The student as global citizen
- An active empathy for the world

Contains

- Spaces for reflection; *critical self-reflection*
- And spaces for engagement with *self, society* and the *world* (problems)
- A *focused interdisciplinarity* – seeing one's studies in the widest possible context
- Serious interaction ('ecologies of practice' – Kemmis)

The ecological graduate

- Self-sustaining, yes, but
- a self-understanding on different levels – global/ local; personal/ professional; systems/ ideas/ persons;
 - and having a care/ concern towards them and their wellbeing
- Recognizing the call of responsibilities towards not merely their sustainability (including one's own sustainability) but also their *improvement*
- (cf the financial crisis and the banking 'industry' – devoid of an 'ecological' perspective – business as usual)
- The Ec G works in and for the interests of the whole world.

Conclusions

- Curricula in the university are *on a cusp*
- *Universities are bewitched* – discursively, practically, economically
- *Elephant traps* await the unwary – that the proselytizers seldom recognize
- The curriculum has *tendencies to close*
- But *new spaces* and opportunities are opening
 - And wider conceptions as to being educated in the C21
- Still, options are not good in themselves
- *The problem*: not just that we jump onto new technologies
- But that we are *not being sufficiently imaginative* in exploring possibilities.
- Can we be *utopian*? Can we *realize* our utopias ?
- And bring forward a higher education fit for the C21?



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