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Judgement calls in the university

Summary

The university has been transformed by competition and consumer values, seen most vividly in the UK. Knowledge and learning are reduced to what can be easily measured, calculated and compared. The impoverished and reductive language that has taken hold affects the way in which we think about education and how we behave and live out our academic lives: it does not allow enquiry of the questions that matter – and which are central to an education that is higher – and that do not go away however much the view is of solving problems and reducing things to a question of economic value.

Key words: judgement, knowledge, university, European Union.

The transformation of higher education

Institutions of higher education are far more complex than in the past; there are far more of them and there is far more diversity than ever before – certainly in the case of Britain, and the demands on vice-chancellors and senior managers are significant. Today universities have to: ensure their institution's survival in a highly competitive market environment; attract more students; be responsive to a more diverse student body with many first generation students; devise new courses for new student markets; generate more income; demonstrate and increase the international reputation of individuals and the institution through research and teaching; establish partnerships and collaborations with a wide range of bodies and organisations across the world; and engage in knowledge transfer (see: Harris 2011).

The expansion of university activity has been accompanied by new technologies that make possible the collection of a wide range of data that can help determine how healthy it is. Significant changes in financial regulation and institutional governance have also taken place including new quality assurance systems and the assessment of monitoring students.

The last five years alone have seen significant changes in the way in which communication is carried out. Whereas it used to be the computer and laptop now it is the iPad and smart phone. Teaching and learning materials can be downloaded onto students' mobiles so that they can have access at a touch of a screen. The use of Facebook and Twitter has also become mainstream as a means of communication among the student body but also between staff and students.

The latest technology opens the university to the public in ways once unimaginable. For example, parents and prospective students can take virtual tours of a university and make choices based on what they see; they can easily compare and contrast and make judgements about different universities based, to some extent, on how good or appealing the website is.

Technology also allows institutions to develop and promote their brand as it were – and this can be adapted to accommodate changes in the market. In ways similar to supermarkets, which gather data on their customers' habits, universities monitor their website usage and marketing materials with a view to improving the conversion rate of 'hits' on the website into students on the campus. Technology affects not only the way that institutions function but also the way in which knowledge and understanding are conceived. There is increasing reference to the 'student experience' and the importance of this to universities as students are also key consumers of their services. It is also worth noting the rise of the student senate which is chaired by the vice-chancellor and represents the student body.

In the Coalition Government's first White Paper on higher education, published in 2011, titled *Students at the heart of the system*, emphasis is given to student experience and the need to improve it and to ensure, "value for money in return for students' financial contribution to their studies". It goes on to state that more robust quality systems and greater transparency and accountability are also needed, as is better incorporation of student feedback and student evaluation of their teachers and courses into the regulatory system. Institutions must, "deliver a better student experience; improving teaching, assessment, feedback and preparation for the world of work" (2011: 4, cited in Harris 2013).

It is worth noting that it was back in 1996 that the European Commission stated quite boldly that the aims of education need no longer be debated: the purpose of higher education is to serve the needs of the economy. This, it was implied, was self-evident; moreover, the distinction between education and training is considered redundant (European Commission 1996).

A global industry

The university has become a global industry and is positioned in terms of advancing the interests of the global economy. In the words of the then European Commissioner for Research:

> Universities are powerhouses of knowledge generation (...) that will need to adapt to the demands of a global knowledge-based economy, just as other sectors of society have to adapt.
>
> Janez Potočnik (2006)

Universities are expected to run themselves as businesses. One policy sociologist, Stephen Ball, uses the term 'Education plc.' in the title of his 2007 book to reflect the extent to which the private sector has become involved in education in the UK.

Enterprise is now considered an important role of the university alongside its traditional roles of teaching and research. Income from enterprise is now crucial for institutions. Terms such as entrepreneurship and innovation have entered the discourse and can also be found in European Commission documents and form part of a particular discourse around the notion of the European citizen. For example, in a 2006 communication entrepreneurship was defined as:

> an individual's ability to turn ideas into action. It includes creativity, innovation and risk taking, as well as the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve objectives. This supports everyone in day-to-day life at home and in society, makes employees more aware of the context of their work and better able to seize opportunities, and provides a foundation for entrepreneurs establishing a social or commercial activity. (CEC 2006: 4)

As well as being an important income stream enterprise is also spreading across the university into the curriculum with modules designed to improve students' entrepreneurial skills. For the new university this may be an attractive way to identity itself because of the very different research profiles of the old and new universities.

Another feature of the educational landscape is the relationship between transnational companies (e.g. IBM, Apple) and the influence they exert over EU education policy through their ability to exploit the technology available (see: Harris 2011). The European Commission regards ICT as crucial to educational development and to creating an e-Society and a transition to a digital knowledge-based economy and society. Also the view that national policies are not able to deal with the challenges of globalisation and that what is required is a more systematic and coordinated strategy if Europe is to compete successfully in a global economy. Roger Dale and Susan Robertson (2009) in their work on globalisation and Europeanisation note the dominance of terms such as 'learning products' and 'learning services' and point out that investments in ICT infrastructure, and education and training, are directed at transforming the forces and means of production. One serious implication of this they argue is that education is losing its public good function at the expense of its importance as a private good in the European space. This raises questions of other goals of the EU concerning social justice and cohesion (see: Harris 2011).

Also in the European policy space one can see a move towards standardisation and homogenisation of education systems. As I have argued elsewhere political and educational discourse is driven by a need to have a common measure. Take for example Bologna and the aim of standardising higher education systems – moving from systems plural to system in the singular. The aim of a single European Area of Higher Education is a means of increasing the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education. It is also designed to manage difference, and does this through endorsing standardised procedures, a form of performativity. There is also the drive for national outcomes-based qualification frameworks (see: Young 2009, Muller & Young 2014). There are, Michael Young notes, 138 such frameworks around the world; the most recent of these have been designed for countries in developing world which draws them into a system that is, Young describes as already iniquitous and based on neoliberal market principles. A further example is the role of the international surveys such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, or Trends in International Mathematics and Science (TIMS).There is pressure for national governments to take part in such surveys – it is necessary to be seen as a 'serious player'.

There is another aspect to the homogenisation and standardisation taking place and this is to do with the global dominance of the English language. Not only is English privileged and especially publication in English journals, but for non-native speakers it can also 'normalise' the instrumentalist and technicist

language that is dominant today. For example, we talk of 'delivering' a module or a curriculum. This use of the word delivery is far removed from its Latin origins – *liberare* – to set free.

Employability

I do not want to suggest that the relationship between the university and business is not important – it is of course; there is a practical and technical need for employees to possess the necessary skills to carry out their job – and employers expect university graduates to have acquired these skills before they leave university. The danger, however, is in privileging an acquisition of a portfolio of skills and competences over an engagement with ideas and ways of thinking connected with bodies of knowledge and disciplinary traditions. The emphasis on transferable skills implies that study can be reduced to simple facts decontextualised and generalisable; learning is reduced to a skill that is unconnected to knowledge. There is an emphasis on developing autonomous learners. The student is seen as a consumer who has a choice of educational products to suit their individual needs or preferences (Harris 2011). The subject can come to be seen primarily in terms of the number of credits or in terms of improving a student's 'employability'. Less attention seems to be given to matters of curriculum content; it is reduced to the most effective 'delivery'.

Taking the common for granted

Whilst the concern for a common measure is shaped by a commitment to the common good, there is a taken-for-grantedness about what the common good is. Alastair MacIntyre (2009) provides a persuasive critique of the contemporary American university, much of which is highly pertinent to the British context. In brief his argument runs as follows: there is no shared agreement on what is the common good because there is no shared moral reasoning in the modern world. He points to the specialisation and fragmentation of the university curriculum which makes it impossible, he thinks, to talk about a unity of knowledge or a unity of understanding. For MacIntyre the contemporary university has become a place where anything – and everything – can be found; it is no longer clear what the university stands for as institutions come to resemble business corporations.

MacIntyre argues that the absence in modern culture of a shared tradition or sense of coherence is problematic because the tradition of the virtues is for him essential and must be restored because it is this that sustains social traditions. By doing so the focus of concern shifts from the individual and individual actions to social practices, and this is so significant because it is such practices that he considers central to our ethical lives.

The kind of community and common endeavour which interests MacIntyre are those commonly found in religious-based communities, such as in the pre-liberal medieval university but also in communitarianism. He suggests that the theoretical atheism of the Marxist university in the former Soviet Union was in some ways more intellectually stimulating than the practical atheism found in in the contemporary American university. The reason he thinks this is because Marxism offered a framework, based on a dialectical and historical materialist understanding of the nature of things, within which different disciplines could engage.

For MacIntyre, an institution with some religious affiliation provides a coherence that allows a better intellectual life but not one that is exclusive: it allows and wants engagement between different traditions as well as within the different traditions (see: Harris 2012 for more discussion of this).

Another aspect that comes to mind when thinking of the university as a community is that of place. The university is a place rather than a space of learning and of knowledge. The distinction is an important one because the latter, space, suggests something that can be measured, denoting a physical space such as you would find on an ordnance survey map. The word place, in contrast, denotes a locale, somewhere that emerges from the lives and histories of others. The meaning of a place cannot be measured in ways that underpin instrumentalist thinking.

Judgement calls

The title for this talk is judgement calls in the university; this can be read in more than one way. I have been making a judgement about the state of higher education today – calling it into question – in particular drawing attention to the impoverished language that is used in political and educational discourse which closes things down, it limits what can be said and thought about the meaning of education and the purpose of the university. The title also suggests the need to restore the centrality of judgement to the university.

In a performative society the centrality of judgement has been blurred significantly under the systems of accountability and transparency which exist across the education sector. There is a preoccupation with endless procedures and systems that are, so it is supposed, constantly being improved and made more efficient. We must put faith in systems rather than our professional knowledge and judgement. The word 'criteria' which is a commonly used word in education has come to mean a list of points that refer to behavioural outcomes that can be identified without teacher judgement because judgement is deemed to be subjective and undesirable.

But, teaching and learning are based on communities of practice and thinking and judgement are essential in education practices. Judgements are not made according to lists of criteria but by those involved in the practice itself. We generally rely on those in the community to make good or sound judgements. For example, academic peer review, an important practice in higher education and one where judgement is crucial. There is a shared understanding of what constitutes good practice derived from membership of a disciplinary tradition; it's not derived from hard and fast criteria that can be ticked off. Learning involves disciplined activity that requires the skills of thinking and judgement but not in the sense of individualised lists of competences which suggests that learning and knowledge are both individualised and reduced to what can be easily measured. It is worth recalling Newman for whom the university was concerned not only with the well trained mind but also the capacity of 'arranging things according to their real value' (cited in: Ker 1991: 17). In contemporary society interests tend to be individualised and privatised, and community or society as the aggregate of such interests. Being part of a learning community is to have a shared concern, and it is also to be committed to something (Harris 2013).

Thinking about judgement and practice bring us back to the teacher, and this is important because it is easy to lose sight of the teacher and the important relationship between teacher and student today amid the technological revolution that is changing teaching and learning in radical ways as indicated earlier. The teacher is seen more as a technical operator rather than being someone with the responsibility of initiating the learner into paths of enquiry. George Steiner discusses this very powerfully in his *Lessons of the Masters* (2003) where he reminds us of the vocation and calling of the teacher. There is he says:

> no craft more privileged. To awaken in another human being powers, dreams beyond one's own; to induce in others a love for that which one loves; to make of one's inward present their future; this is a threefold adventure like no other. (pp. 183–4)

The instrumentalist and technical language that is now dominant seems to be more reliable than ordinary language and there is a sense of security in the quality assurance systems that operate and which depend upon the use of 'hard' 'objective' 'data'. But, such language is deeply damaging and, I would argue, has harmful consequences because it distorts conceptions of practice and it blurs the centrality of judgement. We need to be attentive to the language we use and to a different kind of language to think and talk about the purpose of higher education. A good place to start is with J.L. Austin.

In his 1955 Harvard Lectures, which were later published as *How to do things with words* (1962), Austin demonstrates the variety of things that we do with words. He wanted to move away from the tendency to focus on the true/false or value/fact dichotomisation in the assessment of the meaning of statements. He began by distinguishing between performative statements – utterances that do something, for example, in the marriage ceremony, 'I do' or in the naming of a ship, 'I name this ship' – and constative utterances which correlate with a state of affairs, for example, 'the bottle is on the table'. What he found was that many of our words have meaning not because they describe something, the state of affairs, but because of what they do. Later, however, Austin sees how this neat distinction actually breaks down and that there is in fact no purity in performatives; and he introduces the notion of commissive. The commissive force of an utterance relates to the way that it constitutes a promise to attempt to do something. This is perhaps easier to see with religious language but it is there too in other forms of language, including the everyday language that people use. We just need to think of the kinds of performative acts that take place in the university such as graduation ceremonies and inaugural lectures to see this.

When we utter something we are at the same time saying something about ourselves, what is important to us; it is at some level an expression of our assent to a world-view; this is inherent in having something to say. We can see this in relation to the professor, especially perhaps the professor in the humanities, who offers an account not only of the way things are but of how things *could be* – there is a profession of belief in *something*. Here the professor recognises what is at stake. The professor can have a transformative effect on their students, through inspiring them, sometimes shocking them, challenging them in various ways. Higher education cannot be just functional in the sense that the university is there to serve society's needs – improve national competitiveness and strengthen the economy; it must also be transformative. Critical awareness, openness to different ways of thinking, readiness for conversation, are not just central in higher education but throughout life. They help us see the deeper questions that confront us concerning the meaning of life and of our relation to others.

There is a danger that the successful professor is seen as one who fulfils the functional dimension (for example, having a good record of external funding; a long and impressive list of publications in all the 'top' journals; sits on a wide range of committees, and so on), whilst less attention is given to the one who is concerned with the transformational. There needs to be a transformative dynamic at work as well where the professor professes a belief in something, risks giving a point of view, challenges her students; disturbs them.

In summary

What I have tried to do in this talk is to first of all give a brief outline of the situation in HE in England. I have noted the way in which the world of higher education has been transformed by competition and consumer values, seen most vividly in the UK. Knowledge and learning are reduced to what can be easily measured, calculated and compared. The educational process is clearly set out in advance and can be achieved as efficiently and effectively as possible for preconceived ends – to become economically active global citizens. The impoverished and reductive language that has taken hold affects the way in which we think about education and how we behave and live out our academic lives.

The current situation we find ourselves in raises questions for us about what is at stake in our work as academics. It does not allow enquiry of the questions that matter – and which are central to an education that is higher – and that do not go away however much the view is of solving problems and reducing things to a question of economic value. It closes down the possibilities that a richer meaning of education can offer, and the importance of this because it is ultimately about how we see ourselves and the kind of society we want to aspire to. The way the world is depends in part on the language we use, in how we word it.

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