Glimpsing the Ecological Curriculum

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My talk

I want to argue four propositions:

1 Our world is unknowable in key respects (certainly the world of 2020)

2 It is a world of contested ideas

3 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.

4 The idea of the curriculum that I want to advance – the ecological curriculum – reflects what it is to be a university in the twenty-first century.

The World of 2020

- Turbulence
- Economic - crises
- Global inequalities
- Wars/ terrorism
- Environmental degradation
- Loss of biodiversity
- New technologies – giving rise to problems of living
- Care of the elderly
- - and utter contestability of ideas & perspectives

Reflections

- Not merely that the world is changing
- Identities and responsibilities are not fixed
- They are contested and change
- What it is to be an X (a doctor, a business manager, a chief executive, a professor!) are not fixed.
- - a world not just of complexity but of supercomplexity
- ***But*** we are all increasingly called to account by the world.

What is needed

- A hope that higher education can help to develop students as future members of society
- 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
- Not simply a technical matter but differences of values and ends ('economy'/ 'public good'/ 'authenticity' – liberty/ justice/ community …)
- Graduates – as exemplary human beings.

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

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.

Three dimensions of the curriculum
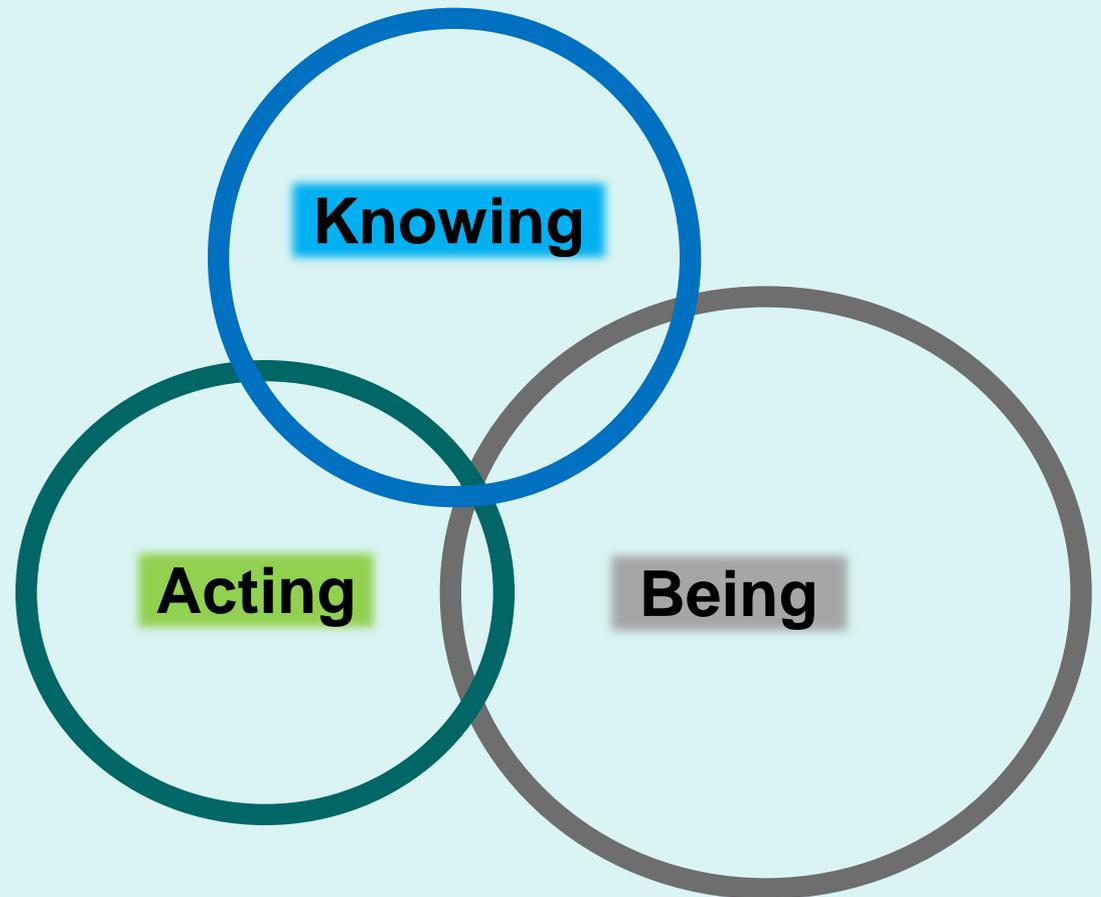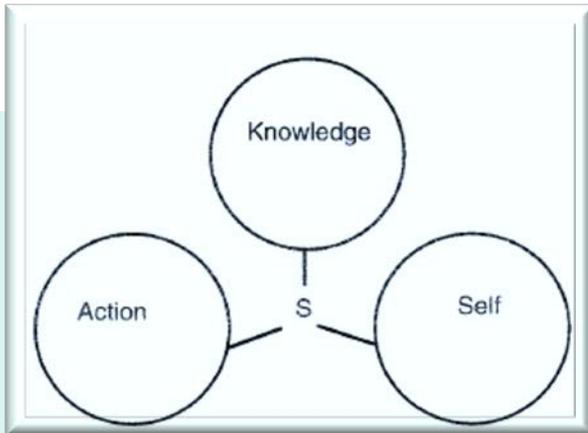
Comparing the disciplines

- The weightings of the three dimensions vary
- Characteristically, one is dominant
- Compare sciences/ humanities/ professional/ creative arts fields

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.

The ideas of 'graduate attributes' & 'graduateness'

- (So) the world presents human being with considerable challenges – technical, social, communicative, personal
- We look to graduates esp to be human beings who can live purposively in the face of these challenges
- Even to be exemplary human beings
- Such a world requires, in the first place, neither knowledge nor skills but human beings of certain kinds
- Searching for a language – 'graduate attributes'; 'graduateness'
- My own suggestion: 'dispositions' and 'qualities'

Dispositions for a world of challenge

- 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

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?

The idea of the ecological

- Felix Guattari – *The Three Ecologies*: 3 'ecological registers': environment; social relations; human subjectivity
- To speak of the ecological brings to view the interconnectedness of all things – a universality
- But this 'ecosophical perspective' precisely allows for difference, diversity.
- '..everything … has to be continually reinvented, started again from scratch, otherwise the processes become trapped in a cycle of deathly repetition.' (p19)
- And so we are led to an 'ecology of the imaginary!' – 'according to different criteria than those of profit and yield'. (p57)
- - 'an ecology of resingularization'. (65)
- - 'a new ecosophy, at once applied and theoretical, ethico-political and aesthetic …' (67)

- Idea of 'deep ecology'.

The ecological curriculum

Promotes:
- Being in the world
- Sensitive to its interconnectedness
- Not inert but engagement
- - in its sustainability and even its improvement
- 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)

- a demanding set of experiences

The ecological graduate

- Self-sustaining, yes, but
- a self-understanding on different levels – global/ local; personal/ professional; systems/ ideas/ persons;
- Different ecological registers (networks & nodes)
- - 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 world.

The student as Global Citizen

- A care/ concern for the world
- A sense of interconnectedness (cf UCL)
- Not living in one's own world
- Helping to bring about a better world (cf 'wisdom')
- A project of 'engagement' – and 'relational thinking'
  - And yet some 'detachment' (Candea et al)
- Implies first-handedness; genuine (critical) thought & action
- Impact on curricula
  - Bringing the world into the classroom (power of new technologies)
- And on opportunities while a student

A particular place for the humanities?

Only some tentative suggestions (K/A/B – for/as a global citizen)

- Entering into the mind of the other; a juxtaposition of multiple 'lifeworlds' – role play
- Imagining the view in another country – eg Collaboration with a similar class in another (eg) developing country
- Exploring difference as such; taking the part of the other – eg adopting a religious/ ethnic view that isn't one's own
- Personal disembedding – extracting oneself from one's own situation
- Timeframes: juxtaposing eras – living out of one's century
- Imagining new possibilities for human *being;* for new ecologies of living;
- Writing in different idioms
- Writing poetry from the perspective of one's own studies
- Grappling with a clash of values; tensions in one's own values

Communication skills?

- The concept of communication skills deserves a forensic examination
- Even a totally different conception
- 'Cultural scripts' (Welikali)
- Receptiveness to otherness
- (African concept of *ubuntu*)
- Writing and speaking – spaces of care, of sensitivity, of precision, of empathy
- The commas matter – but woods and trees
- 'Authoritative uncertainty' (Goodlad)
- Worldly reaching out.

Conclusions: prospects for an ecological curriculum

- Spaces for K/ A and B; and their interconnections
- Encourages the student to K/ A and B on different levels
- But in a global context
- Includes the language of otherness, connectivity
- Not just relativism but authoritative uncertainty
- Nurtures the Ds and opens spaces for the flourishing of the student's own Qs
- Not just matters for the curriculum
- - but also crucially for pedagogy, for the student-teacher relationship
- **Of course, all this is an assault on the marketisation of higher education and the student-as-customer.**
- **Just what are the prospects of the ecological curriculum being realised?**