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‘This Place has Changed my Life’ : student transformation for an uncertain world

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Centre for Higher
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Themes, territory, aims

Territory – knowledge, skills, being a student, world, wellbeing

Themes

- Being a graduate, anywhere in the world
- Living in a crazy world (of supercomplexity)
- A pedagogy of strangeness
- Inadequacy of knowledge and skills
- Becoming fully oneself

Aims

- ie, a critique but a positive critique; a utopia but a feasible utopia

‘This place has changed my life’

- Is this to be heard at Imperial College?
- How does this kind of student transformation come about?
- Is it particular to some disciplines or to all?
- And to some institutions or to all?
- Imperial College?

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 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.'

- **But:** Perhaps all students at Imperial are brimming with confidence all the time?

Strange new world

- The world has always been changing
- But new features attach to contemporary change (from now on)
- Speed of technological change
- New interactive and open information and communication processes
- Institutional change
- Conceptual openness
- So we have 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
- Much talk of ‘employability’ but perhaps there should also be (some) talk of ‘not-yet-in-employment’
- Graduates have to struggle to make their way in the world
- Temporary and PT employment; multiple employers
- Graduates continue to work at finding themselves; establishing their identity to and for themselves.

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.'

- *Open curriculum/ closed pedagogy.*

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?

The lure of skills

- A knowledge economy calls not just for knowledge but for skills
- A mantra of ‘skills, skills, skills’ has arisen
- Occupational skills, transferable skills, personal skills, soft skills ...
 - Part of a discourse on ‘employability’
 - Against a background of graduates with £50,000 debt
- 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
- In situations, in life, it is not 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

Changing lives

- So we glimpse here signs of a learning for life
- Through challenging encounters, the student not merely learns but learns to be, to be themselves
- 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?

Epistemological dispositions (virtues)

- 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

- Carefulness
- Courage
- Resilience
- Self-discipline
- Integrity
- Restraint
- Respect for others
- Openness
- Criticality (towards the world; towards oneself)
- Imagination; creativity

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.

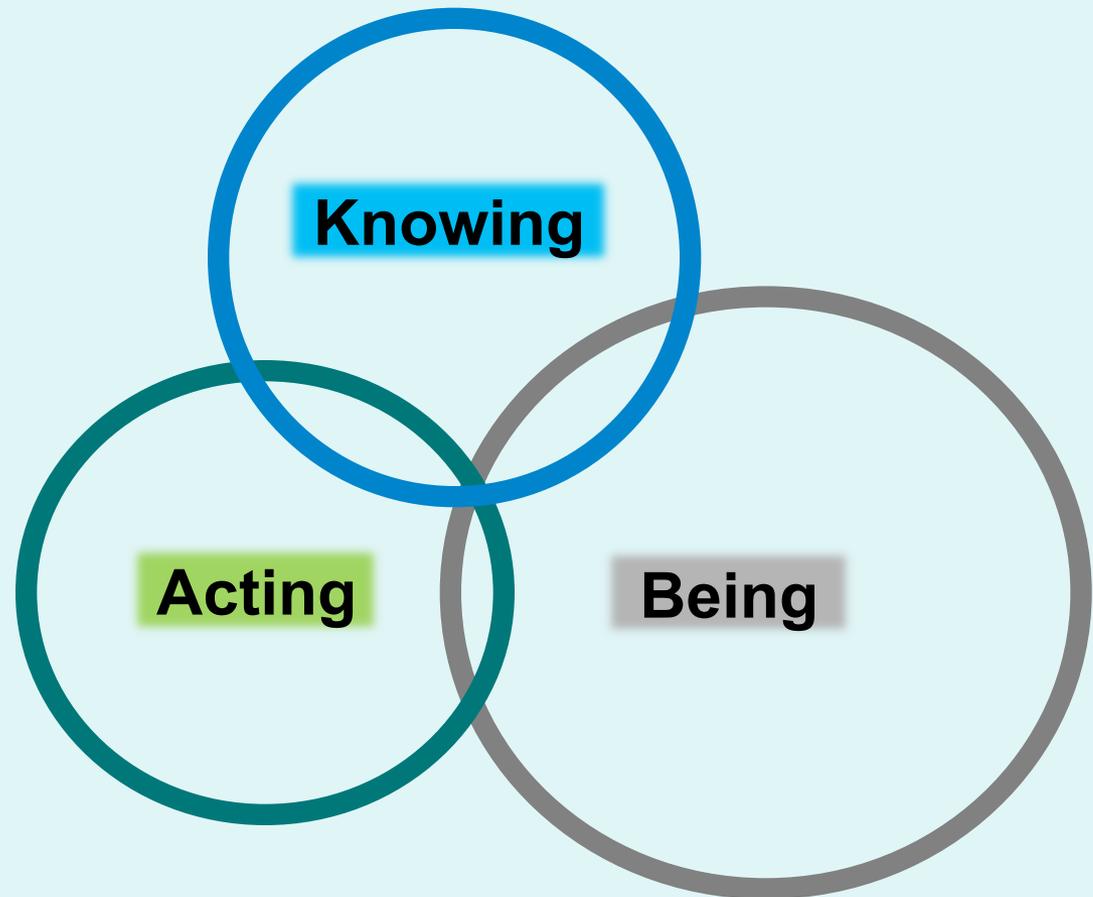
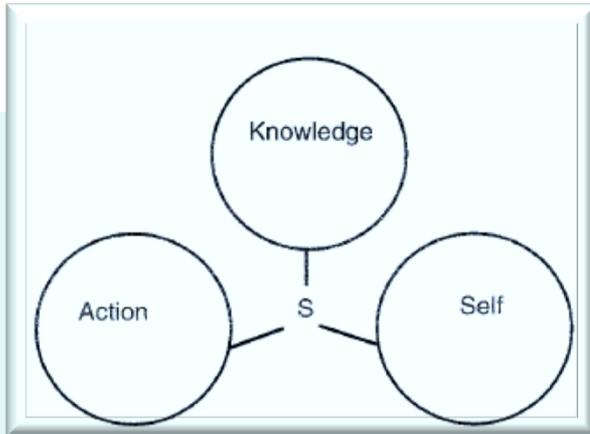
Encouraging the dispositions and the student's own qualities

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.*

The magic triangle

- A genuine higher education calls for a combination of
 - Knowing
 - Acting
 - Being
- In a book ('*A Will to Learn*') I put 'being' ahead of the other two moments, for it is individuals who are engaged in first-handed knowing and being
- But it is a bit more complicated than that!
- For the knowing and the acting enhance being
- And so one emerges as a 'mathematician' or an 'archaeologist' – whatever occupation into which one then goes.



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 even changes lives
- But its realisation requires not just hard imaginative thinking and even utopian thinking but also a will to change
- Much is being accomplished but there is much still to do.



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