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ENGAGING THE CURRICULUM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

There is greater interest than ever before in higher education: more money is being spent on it, more students are registered and more courses are being taught. And yet the matter that is arguably at the heart of higher education, the curriculum, is noticeable for its absence in public debate and in the literature on higher education. This book helps to redress the balance.

Even though the term 'curriculum' may be missing from debates on higher education, curricula are changing rapidly and in significant ways. What we are seeing, therefore, is curriculum change by stealth, in which curricula are being reframed to enable students to acquire skills that have market value. In turn, curricula are running the risk of fragmenting as knowledge and skills exert their separate claims. Such a fragmented curriculum is falling well short of the challenges of the twenty-first century.

A complex and uncertain world requires curricula in which students as human beings are placed at their centre: what is called for are curricula that offer no less than the prospect of encouraging the formation of human being and becoming. A curriculum of this kind has to be understood as the imaginative design of spaces where creative things can happen as students become engaged.

Based upon a study of curricula in UK universities, *Engaging the Curriculum in Higher Education* offers an uncompromising thesis about the development of higher education and is essential reading for those who care about its future.

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Engaging the Curriculum in Higher Education Barnett and Coate

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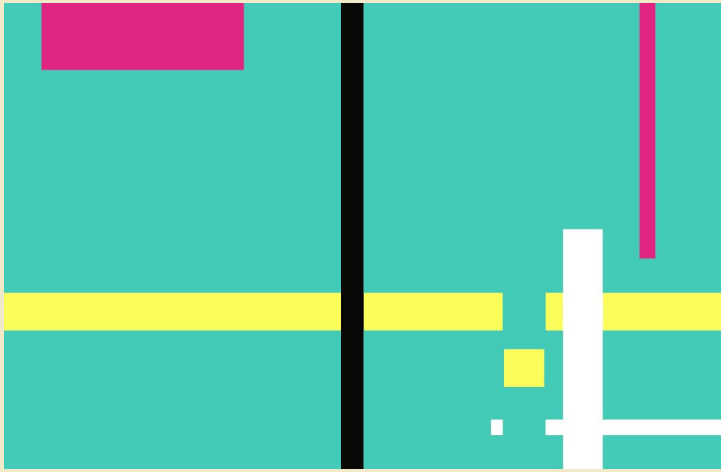
Engaging the Curriculum in Higher Education



Ronald Barnett

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Engaging the Curriculum in Higher Education

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Ronald Barnett and Kelly Coate

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Introduction

Purpose

All around the world, higher education is expanding rapidly, governments are mounting inquiries into higher education, more institutions are involved in running courses of study and more money is being spent on higher education, not least by students themselves. Higher education is ever more important to increasing numbers of people. And yet, despite all this growth and debate, there is very little talk about the curriculum. What students should be experiencing is barely a topic for debate. What the building blocks of their courses might be and how they should be put together are even more absent from the general discussion. The very idea of curriculum is pretty well missing altogether.

In this book, we want to help to put this matter right. We believe that the time is right to raise explicitly questions about the character of courses in higher education. What considerations should be present in their design? What, indeed, does it mean to design courses in higher education? Are there considerations that should transcend the different disciplines or is each field of knowledge a law unto itself? Is the current state of knowledge in a discipline or field the only consideration in shaping a curriculum or are there other considerations? What place should skills have in a curriculum? Is there any place for a sense of students as human beings as distinct from being enquirers after knowledge or as possessors of skills? These are the kind of questions that we want to tackle here.

In posing these questions, it will be clear what this book is not. It is not a recipe book for curriculum designers. It does not *legitimize* a new breed of professionals in higher education, namely 'curriculum designers'. It does not offer hard-pressed lecturers, suddenly faced with the challenge of designing a course, an easily accessible manual for the task. It does not introduce a compendium of lists of skills (whether for employability or any other purpose) that the modern higher education curriculum should contain. It is not an explanation to employers as to what they can necessarily

expect of graduates who come their way; nor is it a guide to students as to what they will find in their courses of study at university.

If it is none of these things, what then is this book about? Who will find any use for it? Will it, indeed, have any uses at all? What we would hope is that – in reading this book – our readers, whether they be lecturers, heads of department, students, staff members of learning and teaching agencies or members of national higher education bodies, would all have a deeper appreciation of both the significance of the curriculum and its complexities. We hope for even more than that, however, for we also hope to persuade our readers that there are some large and serious challenges facing curricula in higher education today in the twenty-first century and these challenges need to be addressed certainly urgently but also concertedly. Energies and effort need to be turned towards the curricula in a systematic fashion by all concerned. In this spirit, we offer sets of principles which may help those involved in the shaping of curricula.

Arguments

'Engaging the curriculum': the title of our book contains an ambiguity, an ambiguity that allows us a space to offer three arguments. *Our first argument* is that the idea of the curriculum has not seriously been engaged within higher education debate and policy formation and even in its practices. Curriculum design in higher education is not yet a properly reflective practice. As a result, the debate over higher education is not what it could be and the newly emerging curricula are often not what they should be. In developing our argument, we shall try to sketch out what it might mean for the curriculum to be engaged in those different regions of practice and pronouncement.

Our second argument hinges directly around the idea of engagement itself. We argue that if curricula in higher education are to go any way towards meeting the challenges that bear upon them, then the idea of 'engagement' offers a fruitful way forward. Curricula may 'engage' in all manner of directions and at different levels, with different speeds and force. We want to draw out what it might mean for curricula to be developed and sustained in such a way that they 'engage'.

If our first argument holds up, namely that the idea of curriculum is not yet seriously addressed in higher education, it follows that part of the task of prosecuting our second argument – that curricula in the twenty-first century might be understood and be deliberately designed 'to engage' – lies in establishing a framework within which the idea of engagement can be drawn out and here lies *our third set of arguments*. In its essence, the framework for which we argue is quite simple, consisting of just three dimensions that help to form curricula. The three dimensions are those of *knowing*, *acting* and *being*. We propose three sets of ideas in particular.

First, while these three dimensions are already present in every curriculum, the extent to which they are present explicitly varies considerably

and, by extension, the extent to which these dimensions are brought into a coherent relationship with each other also varies. It follows that, for us, adequate curriculum design in the twenty-first century lies in doing explicit justice to all three dimensions by engaging them directly and deliberately and doing so in ways that bring knowing, acting and being into a clearly thought through and sustained set of relationships with each other.

Second, we want to distinguish between *curriculum-as-designed* and *curriculum-in-action*. Partly, this distinction arises out of our sense that a curriculum is as much an achievement as it is a task: an effective curriculum has to be brought off *in situ*. Partly too this distinction arises out of our sense that a curriculum is a matter of engaging students in our three dimensions (of knowing, acting and being).

Third, we suggest that curriculum design has too readily been understood as tasks of filling of various kinds (filling spaces, time and modules, not to mention minds). Instead, we propose that curriculum design should be understood as the imaginative *design of spaces as such*, spaces that are likely to generate new energies among students and inspire them, and so prompt their *triple engagement* – in knowing, acting and being.

Approach

Our approach is twofold. *On the one hand*, and drawing on a research project on the undergraduate curriculum in which we have been involved, we will try to offer an overview as to the extent to which curricula are changing, especially but not only in the UK, at the present time. We do not pretend this 'survey' part of our story to be exhaustive, although we hope that readers who are engaged in the sharp end of teaching in higher education will test our account against their own experience. *On the other hand*, what we want to do in the 'descriptive' part of our endeavour is set things up so that we can develop a plausible view as to the options open for curriculum change and even reform at the present time.

This framework will not be a blueprint; it will not include rules that can be followed straightforwardly in designing a curriculum. We shall, however, offer a set of principles that we consider any well-founded curriculum in the twenty-first century should heed.

There are two reasons for believing that curricula rules or templates are not what is called for. First, in a mass and diverse higher education system, curricula are intended to fulfil a very wide range of purposes and it would not be sensible to try to capture, in a single formula as it were, a common code that would specify in advance the elements of every programme of study. Second, and as a value position on our part, we deliberately want to leave open space for and, indeed, to encourage, creativity in curriculum design. Part of our contention, after all, is that the design of curricula has not been sufficiently addressed to the challenges that graduates will face (and

not just in the world of work) so we wish to do all we can to prompt experimentation and fresh ideas.

It follows too that this more speculative and open-ended part of our story is bounded by time and, to a lesser extent, location. Our views as to what is possible for curriculum development have a forward-looking aspect, building as it does from our sense of challenges that are presented by the twenty-first century. In turn, we hope that the analytical framework we sketch out may have some durability attached to it for we intend it precisely as a relatively benign and open framework such that it is susceptible to an infinite variety of interpretations.

At the same time, even though this is a book that has its immediate home in the UK higher education 'scene', still we hope that the framework we develop may be felt to resonate with agendas and challenges that are cross-national in character if not actually fully global. Indeed, things will be going awry if that turned out not to be the case precisely because our framework contains a sense that we live in a global age, even if there remain determinedly local ideas of curriculum, of what counts as a worthwhile student experience and of what should pass for proper relationships between teacher and taught in higher education.

Let us come clean as to our purposes: while we intend that the framework we offer will be susceptible to an infinite variety of interpretations, our framework – hinged around knowing, acting and being – is also intended to engage the curriculum with the wider world and to assist in developing curricula that are likely to encourage students to develop so as to be accomplished human beings in the world that they are likely to face. Of course, that sentence begs some large questions: What *is* it to be an 'accomplished human being'? What features of 'the world that they are likely to face' are being picked out? Why, in any event, should it be thought that *all* curricula should be oriented towards the wider world in some way? Since this is an introduction, we can duck those questions for the time being, but we hope to give answers to them in this book.

What we will own up to here is the admission that, for us, the matter of the curriculum can only seriously be addressed as a large *project*. Designing a curriculum and bringing it off cannot be a purely technical matter but poses large questions of ultimate educational aims: in short, what is it to educate in the contemporary world? The matter of the curriculum also poses large and open questions of the framing of the context within which a curriculum might be designed. To what degree, if at all, might questions be permitted about what it is to be an effective human being in the contemporary world, of human identity, of ultimate ends, of relationships between human beings and their wider environment, and so on? Our view is that, whatever the answer, the questions do not just legitimately come into view but do so necessarily.

Either these matters can come into view deliberately or they will be present tacitly. Indeed, it is part of our argument that these matters have too often been contained tacitly and not even felt to be proper matters for debate. It is

one of our purposes in this book, therefore, to bring into the open the large matters of educational aims and of what it is to *be* and to *become* in the contemporary world. Unless such matters are brought into the open, debate over curricula will be jejune and lacking a purchase, both in its understanding and in its practical implementation.

Fuzziness

In many debates today, a vocabulary of fuzziness abounds: along with 'fuzziness' itself are to be found such terms as 'fluidity', 'liquidity' and 'instability'. This is, for us, an appropriate language with which to approach curricula. The very idea of 'curriculum' is unstable, its boundaries uncertain. Is it just to be confined to the intended educational experience? Does it embrace the 'hidden curriculum'? To what extent should the idea be focused on the actual felt experience of the student? How far out of the laboratory, seminar room or lecture hall does it extend geographically? The library? The clinical setting? The study room?

These questions are legitimate and awkward: they are legitimate in that they ask of anyone concerned about the higher education to come clean and mark out the territory in which they are operating. They are awkward, however, in that the questions yield no definite answers. It is not just that all manner of answers are to be found in the literature as varying aspects are taken up and given prominence by different scholars; it is also that they call attention to the problematic nature of responsibility in this area. Just where do the responsibilities of lecturers, tutors and others 'involved' in the student experience begin and end? What too are the responsibilities of students towards bringing off the potential of their curricula? (Of course, the very construction 'their curricula' implies an ownership of the student towards the curriculum that she experiences which is precisely in question.)

Why do we make these points in an introduction? We do so for two reasons. *First*, as we have just intimated, for many scholars, a curriculum is nothing except as realized and its realization is dependent upon not just its reception among the students for whom it is intended but also their actual engagement with it. Much as we are in sympathy with this sentiment – that a crucial ingredient of a curriculum is its students and their 'negotiations' with and 'constructions of' their curriculum – our main focus is not students as such; and we explain our reasons for this focus in the book itself.

Second, we feel that we should be open and honest right at the start and, yet, on the grounds of elusiveness and permanent fluidity, we cannot be precise as to the territory that the book is in. One source of our inevitable imprecision lies in this question: where do issues of curriculum end and issues of pedagogy begin? Crudely, we might say that a curriculum is a set of educational experiences organized more or less deliberately and that pedagogy is concerned with the acts of teaching that bring off that curriculum. Here, pedagogy becomes a handmaiden to curriculum: curriculum sets out

the aims and pedagogy looks to realize those aims in the most efficacious way. It is a means–end relationship: pedagogy is the means to the ends put up by the curriculum. But things aren't as simple as that nowadays.

For example, is problem-based learning a pedagogical device or would it count as part of a curriculum? To take another example, is the device of students working collaboratively in groups on particular tasks a curriculum or a pedagogical matter? That there is no simple answer to these questions is indicative of the fuzziness of the territory in which this book is situated. Problem-based learning could be considered to be *both* a matter of pedagogical interest and of curricula interest. This fuzziness is explicable: in the contemporary age, 'the student experience' and 'learning' have come to occupy the high ground of interest in public debate – such as it is – over learning and teaching. This has implications for our contemporary understanding of 'curriculum' for the term is widening in meaning to embrace pedagogical acts and to encourage such teaching styles as engage the student. So, even as we seek to wrestle with the idea of 'curriculum' in the context of higher education, the very concept of curriculum is subtly changing. This fuzziness offers both challenges and opportunities.

Significance

By 'significance' here, we mean the significance of the topic with which we are grappling. Its significance, we suggest, takes two forms. First, we contend that there can hardly be a more significant concept than 'curriculum' with which to understand higher education. Across the world, governments are enlarging their national systems of higher education so as to become 'mass' systems: 40 per cent and even 50 per cent or more of young adults are expected to experience higher education. Under these circumstances, therefore, attention to the curriculum becomes an urgent matter: it can no longer, if indeed it ever could, be a matter to which a blind eye is turned. Becoming clear about the purposes of the education all these students are to receive and translating those purposes into coherent sets of experiences is a tall order: matters of curriculum, accordingly, cannot be ducked if higher education is to be enabled to live up to its potential for educating those who experience it. In the context of higher education, curriculum simply *is* a significant matter.

But curriculum has a second kind of significance, one that we have already hinted at. It is that matters of curriculum have, in our judgement, been seriously underplayed in public debate about higher education. We shall say more about this later, but here we just flag the matter. There is – largely, if not entirely – a silence about curriculum as such. This too is a significant matter, there being an apparent reluctance or difficulty to develop a debate about one of the more important aspects, if not *the* most important aspect, of higher education. 'Hamlet without the prince' may be an apt metaphor in describing debate about higher education: the very concept that arguably

should be at the very centre of that debate – namely, that of curriculum – is hardly anywhere to be seen.

If, then, we attach the idea of significance to our endeavours here, it is in the twofold sense that the topic has a significance for the well-being and effectiveness of higher education *and* that the topic has been underplayed and even neglected. As systems move to being more inclusive of students, more diverse across institutions, and more imaginative in their course offerings, and as the world in which graduates will live becomes ever more complex, this neglect can continue only at the expense of higher education and the wider society.

Against this background, it might be felt to be a worthwhile exercise simply in bringing into view the idea of curriculum in higher education. Be that as it may, we are taking the opportunity offered by this book to develop a particular view about curricula in higher education in the twenty-first century; a view that advances a sense of curricula as a space wider perhaps than is normally understood. Indeed, it is precisely part of our argument that curricula, insofar as they are thought about whether tacitly or explicitly, are normally understood in terms that are far too narrow. Part of the motivation for this book lies in a wish on our parts to widen the general understanding of the concept of curriculum to embrace a sense of the student's self and self-understanding; of the student as a person of *being and becoming*. We contend that such a vocabulary is essential if curricula in higher education are to be adequate to the tasks that they face, that of assisting individuals to develop the human wherewithal to prosper in the twenty-first century.

It follows from these initial reflections that we construe our task as necessarily not just multidisciplinary in character, but also, as it might be termed, multi-textual. We draw on our own study which sought to illuminate understandings of curricula and curricula practices in a number of subjects in a range of institutions. That evidence is brought to bear on a story which we develop that in turn draws upon sociological, philosophical and cultural perspectives.

We mention all this not because we wish to parade our credentials but rather to suggest that any serious attempt to understand the contemporary efforts of lecturers, course teams, curriculum designers and others who are grappling with curriculum matters has to be nuanced. The matter before us is complex and deserves an openminded approach. If a higher education curriculum is a set of intentions and activities intended to advance human learning to a high level such that it is adequate to the challenges facing human being and society, then we need all the ideas that may be forthcoming. This book is just one offering in that spirit.

There is, it has to be admitted, a further kind of significance at work here in this book. It is simply that this matter is of personal and professional significance for both of us. For each of us, teaching is of some personal significance: it is partly through teaching that we understand ourselves professionally. We enjoy teaching, are often awed by its responsibilities and gain much – personally and intellectually – from it. Unashamedly, therefore, what

we have to say in this book often derives from our own experience as university teachers.

But our intimate involvement with teaching, with wanting it to be all that it might be, has led us to understand the challenges of teaching as possessing a scope that is not often acknowledged (though see Oakeshott 1989). In particular, we have become convinced from our own experience that the student experience will not be all that it might be unless detailed attention is given to the curriculum. In some senses, then, this is a book that has an autobiographical character and it is a book that represents our own values and beliefs *as* university teachers.

Plan

Our book has three parts. *In Part 1*, we sketch out the context that for us bears upon the design of higher education curricula. Here, we try to identify recent and current ideas of the curriculum embedded in practices and policies. We also go on to point to key features of the wider world in which graduates will have their living and their being and which, therefore, suggest the need for a reshaping of curricula.

In Part 2, by drawing on our empirical study, we develop a schema by which curricula can be understood and we offer some observations on the directions in which curriculum is moving. We suggest that conceptions of curricula in higher education have been widening from a base in knowledge to embrace action and we go on to suggest that a concern with a third dimension, that of human being as such, can also just be detected in contemporary developments.

We applaud this continual widening of curricula, but also suggest that those three dimensions have been and are being construed too narrowly, even as they imply an already widening curriculum. Knowledge has tended to be just that, knowledge without a knowing subject; and action has been confined to talk of 'skills' independently of those skills being deployed in a zone of willed action by a self-conscious human being. A curriculum for the age of instability in which we now are will, we contend, need to do some justice to all three dimensions of knowing, acting and being, although what their precise configuration might be in different subjects and even in different institutions will have to be worked through on the ground. There is room for all kinds of curriculum practices within our schema. If it is at all prescriptive, it is so only at a meta-level. The hard work of determining a proper balance between the three dimensions and of bringing them off in curricula practices lies in front of all concerned.

In Part 3, we build on our findings by examining the idea of curriculum as a form of engagement. Here, we develop our distinction between curriculum-as-designed and curriculum-in-action and we draw out our idea of curriculum as the design of spaces for the student's development in knowing, acting and being. We then go on to explore what it would mean to

institute systematically our conception of curricula – as founded on knowing, acting and being – both at the very local level of teaching and learning and also across institutions.

We observe, for example, that the idea of 'learning and teaching strategies' is bound to fall short of its potential unless they become '*curriculum*, learning and teaching strategies'; but that idea presents challenges of a near intractable kind. If the world is especially complex, then the challenges of bringing off the kind of curriculum we are proposing must themselves be complex in character and must pose considerable challenges to academic professionalism. This is not to say that the challenges of curriculum in the contemporary age cannot be adequately met, but that we should become understanding of the nature of the challenges before us.