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Theme: Higher education – serving and shaping society

Real world, real people: a purpose beyond ourselves in the 21st century

B.M. Gourley

1. Introduction

- 1.1. We live in uncertain and troubling times. We also live in extraordinary times. Never before has the world been so prosperous, never before have so many people lived such long and healthy lives, never before have we witnessed such dazzling technology and never before have we reached, on average, such levels of education. And yet, in absolute numbers, never before have so many people lived in such poverty, never before have so many died from preventable diseases, never before has the planet been so threatened, never before have so many needed education. And it is education that fuels sustainable development, education that is fundamental to enlightened citizenship, to the peace and harmony – and even the continued life – of our species on this planet. It is an education which will have to reach many many more than hitherto, and an education which must be infused with the dramatic portent of our times – historic times where the extremes are not only unacceptable by any standards but capable of being solved with what we have between us.
- 1.2. And it is a time for leadership, especially university leadership. The issues that have to be addressed are complex, they go beyond national and regional preoccupations, they have long time horizons; they call for mobilisation across the world. If universities are unable (or unwilling) to respond to such crucial issues, it is difficult to imagine who would. Indeed if universities cannot respond it is difficult to understand how they could be defended. They would, in my view, be in dereliction of their main purpose – and in conflict with our main claim to universality.
- 1.3. So we need to mobilise our resources – and we need mobilisation at scale. University resources fall under three headings and I will argue under all three.
 - 1.3.1. They have to do with what we teach and it seems to me that we have to understand that traditional curricula might not be the best for our purposes, divided as they are so rigidly into subject disciplines and dominated by faculty concerns. I would argue particularly that we need to give careful attention to the possibility that professional education too will have to change. Furthermore, we cannot rely on traditional delivery methods of education to reach the enormous numbers we need to reach – so we need to acknowledge that traditional methods have to be run parallel to a serious alternative for this purpose – and, in particular, we need technology to be harnessed to the purpose.
 - 1.3.2. Secondly we have research resources and these need to be harnessed to the task.
 - 1.3.3. And thirdly, we have the capacity for community outreach which can harness not only the minds and energies of students and staff but also the potential of our research. In all this we will have to ask ourselves some tough questions about how well we equip our students with a capacity and propensity to act and with a sound ethical grounding in a society where so many have so much and yet show such remarkable lack of concern for those who have so little.

2. **First, we need to pay more particular attention to the nature and purpose of education – and professional education in particular (mainly because the professions dominate so many of the top roles in global big business).**

2.1. Professional education was not always lodged in universities, but some time during the course of the twentieth century, as Frank Rhodes reminds us *“universities have become the essential gateway to and foundation of every major profession”* (page 41; in Huber & Harkavy 2008). And we need to remember that the driving force behind this idea was the belief that a university education was not only broader in purpose and intent than a narrow professional education but that the university milieu would serve the civic values so crucial for a fairer society. Somewhere along the line we seemed to forget that. I share with Frank Rhodes the belief that specialisation and growing utilitarianism have driven faculties (and especially professionally-based faculties) further apart over the last few years and diluted earlier concerns about civic purpose and human rights. This seems especially so in western societies.

2.2. The good news is that we are not alone in contemplating these issues at this time. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (the Foundation that produced the work on Scholarship Reconsidered in the nineties) convened three interdisciplinary seminars over two years, the findings of which were published earlier this year in a book entitled *A New Agenda for Higher Education – Shaping a Life of the Mind for Practice*. In it they pose a series of fundamental questions:

- “What best teaching practices might be identified across the professions and the disciplines?”
- In what ways could the profession and the liberal arts and sciences employ one another’s insights in order to achieve this end?
- Might teaching for practical responsibility and judgement prove a unifying calling for contemporary higher education?” (Sullivan, Rosin & Shulman page xvii)

2.3. The conclusions of this work are to be applauded. I quote two of them:

2.3.1. *“However academic their aspirations, professional programs recognise that understanding alone is not enough for professional students. Such programs have to go beyond critical thinking to look for evidence that their students can take informed action on behalf of clients, according to standards and moral purposes of their profession. The professional pedagogies that foster this kind of student formation are an untapped resource for teaching in the disciplines. But the reverse is also true. We found that the professional program faculty who are most alive to this kind of teaching also recognise and draw on the liberal arts disciplines to accomplish this task.”*

2.3.2. *“Our students will be called to take up concrete places and stances in the lives of others. They must learn to discern the practical salience of academic insight through integrative acts of responsible judgement in the world. What critical thinking pulls apart, responsible judgement must re-connect. The calling of higher education does not end with theory and interpretation. It culminates in the active formation of new narratives of individual and collective identity and responsibility. May our students’ future practices be both mindful and responsible.”* (page 133)

3. **I would also argue at this time that traditional ways of teaching and learning do not constitute sufficient mobilisation for the task at hand.**

3.1. In particular I believe we need to integrate our community outreach activities into the teaching and learning experience of our students – and scale them up. The Carnegie work points to four key challenges: developmental, institutional, dialogical and situated – highlighting the fact that it is difficult to change the way faculties work in the institutions constructed along present lines. That is no doubt true but we should also look to initiatives in various university communities that could also act on the change agenda. The most important of these in my opinion is what has come to be known as ‘service learning’ – a movement which seeks to engage students in real work in the communities both local and further afield in an attempt to not only locate learning but

also to emphasise the importance and even necessity of students becoming involved in making the world a better place. The growth of the NGO sector is one of the major trends of our time as more and more people recognise that governments are not always able to solve local problems. Indeed, as Daniel Bell once famously observed, *“the national state has become too small for the big problems in life, and too big for the small problems.”* (1977, p 132).

- 3.2. Many of us will be familiar with initiatives in some universities which involve students in community efforts that relate directly to their professions: law students running legal aid clinics, medical students running community medicine clinics, accountancy students running tax aid or financial aid clinics and so on. It seems to me that these should hardly be voluntary. But whatever they are, universities should be emphasising the importance of voluntary work and actively creating possibilities for all its students to pursue. We heard this morning of at least one good example. This must be part of our ‘great mobilization’.
- 3.3. One such universities’ initiative is the Talloires Network, an international collective of individuals and institutions committed to civic engagement and harnessing the power of university students worldwide. The network was initiated in 2005 by university leaders from 25 countries and every continent at a conference in Talloires, France. These leaders drafted the Talloires Declaration on the Civic Roles and Social Responsibilities of Higher Education, and formed a network to promote action around the principles of the Declaration (<http://www.tufts.edu/talloiresnetwork/?pid=35>). Readers are invited to join the Network.
- 3.4. The Network is driven by the belief that there is value in building a global movement of universities committed to playing an active role in addressing the needs of the societies in which they are embedded. Such value would derive from building on and expanding our contributions, sharing our successes and research, learning from each other and encouraging interested parties to join the ranks of the growing numbers who act in this sphere. It also represents this understanding that the issues in the world today require mobilisation at scale, and such mobilisation should also be seen to be a responsibility of universities. What other world institutions have a collective sense of this mission and purpose? And of course it represents an opportunity to target particular issues.
- 3.5. At the moment, the Talloires Network is encouraging members to join a global effort to address illiteracy. With millions of students between us, we can truly make a difference and contribute to achieving one of the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals. It is also an opportunity for universities to reach hard-to-reach potential students as we seek to widen participation in higher education – another crucial factor in stemming the tide of poverty and ignorance. The Network is also set to embark on a global environmental project.
- 3.6. The more we are able to harness students, in large numbers, across the world, the easier we find it to attract sponsorship and funding. The prospect of a very large network representing thousands of staff and millions of students throughout the world is a really exciting one with huge possibilities. It is also important as a symbol of what is appropriate for these times. And it is a fundamental learning experience for our students who will never be able to claim that they don’t know how they, as individuals, can make a difference in this complex world.
- 3.7. I now want to pause over the technologies we have at our disposal. In particular I pose the question as to whether we are harnessing those technologies sufficiently well to reach the many, many millions of people who could go into higher education but for whom there are insufficient places. This is not just the concern of open and distance learning institutions, however well they have done over the last decade in growing numbers. It is the concern of us all. I point you to the rise of the Open Educational Resource movement where several universities are putting their educational resources on the web, free to use. The possibilities this movement contains for reaching people in whole new ways, exciting ways that will enrich our teaching and learning for more conventional students as well. It presents us with the possibility of vastly increasing access to education, of sharing our common wealth – and in the process, learning about each others’ values and concerns in a fast-changing world.

4. To extend the argument briefly, what about giving students a sound ethical grounding?

- 4.1. Rodolfo Stavenhagen, writing in June this year in the *European Journal of Education* draws attention to the task of education today. *"In today's globalised and interconnected world,"* he says, *"living together peacefully has become a moral, social and political imperative on which depends, to a great extent, the survival of humankind. No wonder that education in its widest sense is called upon to play a major role in this worldwide shared task."* (Page 161)
- 4.2. He is not alone in making this call. UNESCO itself has rallied education – and particularly Higher Education, to recognise its unique responsibilities. Article 9 of the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (1998) urges that: *"Higher education institutions should educate students to become well informed and deeply motivated citizens, who can think critically, analyse problems of society, look for solutions to the problems of society, apply them and accept social responsibilities."* The next UNESCO world conference on higher education is in the middle of next year and it pursues this theme.
- 4.3. I too believe that Universities and their staff should aim to encourage students to 'think ethically' rather than simply adhere to a set of rules or guidelines. After all, what we do in our personal lives reflects most accurately our ethical underpinnings. It is not what you say but what you do that will be the benchmark by which you will be judged.
- 4.4. Too often in the university teaching focuses on knowledge acquisition and critique. Many faculties view their roles as analysts and observers but not as coaches of their students on the process of developing their own moral judgements. Professor Hutchinson of York's Law School has suggested that there are three basic steps that must be undertaken in order to achieve this: *"Teaching ethics in such a way that it encourages students to treat its study as an active and continuing challenge rather than a passive and finite undertaking, teaching ethics in such a way that the method of instruction obliges students to deal with ethical problems in an engaged and participatory session, and teaching ethics in such a way that ensures that the process of the product of ethical reasoning is connected to the messy socio-political context in which ethical controversies and their proposed solutions arise."* (quoted in Potter, 2002). Easy to say, not easy to do in crowded curricula, but it is the task before us.
- 4.5. One should not pass up the opportunity here to recognise that the internet, paradoxically perhaps, also provides us with opportunities to reach out, harness volunteers and create a new kind of society for the 21st century. The young people of today are already devising innovative solutions to global challenges – and using technology to share ideas and mobilise resources (volunteer forces) across the world. Take Syinc (<http://www.syinc.org/>) as just one example – formed by a young ex-psychology student, Bernise Ang, to connect young Singaporeans to take action on a wide range of social issues from HIV/Aids to social entrepreneurship. Another website - Brainstorming (<http://www.brain-storming.info/index.php>) – was formed in 2004 by Talio Delgado during her European Voluntary Service project within ARSIS (The Youth Cultural Association from Romania) as a virtual channel for young people from around the world to contribute stories, essays and photojournalism on everything from human rights to social exclusion. There are many more.

5. In conclusion – 'call to mobilisation'

- 5.1. In this address I have emphasized the professions (although my argument ranges further) because they represent such a force for change in the practice of those professions – and indeed in their role as leaders of most big businesses. But one just has to think of the role of teachers in making change happen, to say nothing of the role that lawyers, accountants and bankers play in big business, to the role that engineers and architects play in our built environment, an environment so imperilled, to the role doctors and nurses play in improving the health. One could go on. It still holds that most of our students represent an elite in society and if that elite does not recognise the imperatives of the world today, then universities must surely shoulder some of the responsibility for that. Saving the future of our species on this planet "is not a spectator sport" (p 285; in Brown, 2008) – and we haven't got much time. Each and every one of us must play our role.

5.2. The fact is that the young people of today will, more than at any other time in history, make a spectacular difference to what happens this century – and “*there needs to be an absolute crusading determination*” to bring change about. This generation will collectively determine whether life as we know it on our planet survives, or not. As educators we have a critical role in fostering, supporting, encouraging and, above all, equipping our students with the values and skill-set necessary to drive forward such initiatives. Have the stakes ever been higher?

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