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Liberal Education May Be Dead but the Magic Will Not Die!

Liberal education is dead! It was the product of a specifically Eurocentric intellectual enterprise. This approach to knowledge has been thoroughly crushed by the rise of techno-fundamentalism and the manipulation of the educational market place in which education has been replaced with edu-anxiety (Bussey, 2012). Crisis piles on crisis to create a pressure cooker environment in which learning is uncoupled from inner meaning and reduced to sets of performance indicators designed to maintain a largely technological and materialist globalising civilisation. But even though Liberal Education may no longer have relevance in the knowledge market place, this does not mean that what it stood for—the intrinsic value of non-vocational knowledge—has lost its deeply human relevance.

Looking at the past to when Liberal Education had its heyday, it existed in a privileged and serene environment—a kind of ivory tower for sure—we called the university. Now the name ‘university’ is still in use but the creature that hosted the liberal arts was a very different one from the beast we now know as the university. It’s a bit like comparing Pegasus with a draught horse. Pegasus was all magic and cultural power; the modern university is a draught horse that has been thoroughly harnessed to the needs of capital. I am sure the draught horse still has secret dreams—where it plays at being Pegasus—but the reality is, a draught horse will never fly.

Intrinsic Knowing

So what can we say about intrinsic knowledge? Certainly it is more needed than ever. Yet it has fled the hallowed halls and gone underground. It is resisting the dominant knowledge regime and working in the lives of many cultural creatives (Ray and Anderson, 2000) who have found that the inner life of learning has its own sweet pleasures and pains but is also deeply relevant to our times of intellectual anorexia and the problems this condition spawns.

I am focusing on intrinsic knowledge to avoid the liberal educational trap of focusing on a set of markers generally associated with the old liberal education model – the humanities, the classics, literature. Certainly these are worthy areas of study but do they make us liberal? Recently Kwame Appiah tells us the story of the nineteenth century Englishman Francis Burton who in many ways exemplified the best of a liberal education but who was also deeply afflicted with the classist and racist attitudes of his day (Appiah, 2006, pp. 6-8). The point is that the educational model that the liberal vision is based on is deeply geocentric in the sense critiqued by Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). This liberal educational model is an expression of a will to power that distorted all it contemplated. The geosophiological and geohistorical biases at the heart of this project have been undermined by (1) what Martha Nussbaum calls the focus on ‘an education for profit-making’ (2009, p. 6); (2) the expanded...
civilisational possibilities inherent to globalisation (Giri, 2011; Guha, 2002); and (3) the fleeing of students from the humanities to job oriented courses (Axelrod et al., 2001).

What is of value in any education worth the name is an expanded sense of meaning and purpose that is founded on curiosity, the ability to live in a complex and uncertain world rich in paradox, the patience to collaborate and co-create in new forms of open-ended knowledge, the robust capacity to resist the allure of Truth and the closure this promotes, the psychological and emotional resilience to cope with multiplicity and, perhaps most important of all, a sense of relationship to the world and its many forms (Bussey, 2010). It seems to me that such qualities can emerge just as easily from a good engineering or accountancy course as from a course in Hindu literature or the study of Greek architecture.

This is a moot issue as the die is already cast and universities have by and large embraced ‘academic capitalism’ in favour of less economically rational education (Axelrod et al, 2001). Furthermore those seeking deeper social and affective literacies are looking elsewhere to nonformal and informal contexts to continue their personal and collective journeys in life. They have done so because higher education is failing to address their sense of existential dissonance. The entropy this fosters weighs heavily on many, sapping identity through the perceived disjunction between what we are all doing in this world and what we all desire for ourselves and for future generations. There is a pervasive sense that things indeed should be better and that we all need to work towards more enabling futures (Eckersley, 2004; Ray, 2000).

Vocational and Non-Vocational

Vocational knowledge takes the knower into the world; non-vocational knowledge takes knowers into themselves: the former deals with the externals of the world while the latter is an interior affair. While the directionality of the knowing is significant, both can be inspired by curiosity, passion and attention—a caring for what is known and for the project of knowing in and of itself. Under academic capitalism the exterior has been commodified and pacified while the interior has been cast into the darkness of our cultural shadow.

This split however is a modern condition. In the premodern world artisans had their own wisdom traditions, their own bridges between the inner and the outer states of consciousness. With the formalisation of knowledge transmission we began the journey towards the schism in knowing in which experts have narrow disciplinary skills and the non-expert is the passive recipient. In and of itself this is not a problem; it becomes one when we begin to see the divide as natural and the knowledge systems involved as definitive and closed. There is a place for formal knowing—and yes, I would want a trained doctor to operate on me—just as there is also a place for informal and nonformal knowledge transmission.

The Law of Two Feet
In recent years, as universities have restructured and downsized the humanities across the board, intrinsic knowledge has migrated from the university to less formal sites more conducive to the opacity associated with this form of knowing. It has found a home in the cultural projects bubbling up around the world (Hawken, 2007). These projects are both resisting the domination of the knowledge economy and also facilitating a return to deeper knowledge forms that are suited to cultural and personal renewal.

This article is being written while I attend the 2013 gathering Dialogue en Humanité in Lyon, France (http://dialoguesenhumanite.org/). At this gathering people from around the world and all over France join in sharing, in informal contexts, their gifts, their passions, their innovations for the future. Here the cultural creativity is high as the arts blend with body work, philosophy cross-fertilizes with alternative technology, and many languages flow in inter-cultural exchange. The nonformal dimension of the dialogues is apparent in its global reach. It is not a traditional organisation but a collective with global-local nodes all committed to the exploration and dissemination of intrinsic knowing. Yet all involved recognise that such knowing has deep political, economic, and social relevance. Intrinsic knowledge has effects in the world; it always has. Interestingly the dialogues often have institutional (formal) connections. UNESCO supports the Lyon gathering. Sometimes the dialogues are even hosted by universities, and many involved have strong working relationships with universities. Yet the people involved seek to express their creativity outside these conflicted institutions. Perhaps they, like me, bring the knowledge and emotional energy gained from such informal and nonformal encounters back to the formal sites of practice?

What is clear is that the intrinsic and the non-vocational have found other places to continue the cultural work that such ways of knowing represent. Universities of course can play a role in this work. The Regional Centre of Expertise West Sweden (RCEWS) is a case in point. In some ways this organisation is like the Dialogues but on a regional level. It is sponsored by the UN and is dedicated to regional economic and social renewal. The RCEWS was inaugurated in March 2013. Its goal is to be a dispersed polycentric ‘organisation’ that hosts creative meetings to foster innovation, entrepreneurship, and environmental and social sustainability. The conceptual map for the RCE emerged organically through the confluence of formal, informal, and nonformal groups meeting in West Sweden since 2006 at what are called Summer Seminars. One of the key organizers for the seminars and RCE is Miriam Sannum. She explains the process thus:

Each seminar is a convergence of the work and interests of three quite different kinds of educational institutions that transcend the borders between the informal, the formal and the non-formal. Thus we have the informal Academy for Sustainable Development which consists of people who meet to discuss and reflect on issues but which has no formal educational function (i.e. no certificates, courses, complex bureaucracy); the formal University West; and the non-formal participatory adult study organisation SV (www.sv.se) where people gather to take study circles or courses in areas that enrich their lives and may or may not lead to utilitarian outcomes (2012, p. 25).

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1 See http://rcevast.wordpress.com/
In its journey to accreditation with the UN, the team developing this process-oriented and multidimensional vision of a learning organisation that was open-ended and committed to ‘holding space’ rather than to making knowledge claims drew in researchers from both University West and Gothenburg University. Much discussion has occurred since about how to make sense of these aspirations in a world that demands order and linear accountability. In this work university researchers rub shoulders with grass-roots activists, sustainability educators, artists, and business owners. What all are aware of is that we have a lot of knowledge about things, but not about how to find ourselves and the new forms to birth a sustainability paradigm that does not replicate the old ways. As Sannum points out:

The RCE West Sweden is a very open, learning, mainly self-organising, network structure where the leadership task is to ‘not know’ and to ‘hold the space’, which are examples of generative sustainability patterns (2012, p. 28).

What is clear however is that the hold of the university on ‘useless knowledge’ (Graber, 2012) has ended and that communities are the new sites for emergent knowledge networks. Learners have followed what Harrison Owen calls the ‘law of two feet’ (Owen, 2008), leaving universities in search of the emergent conditions required to foster innovative personal and social forms. The kind of learning being evoked in these encounters is resilient and non-definitional.

Conclusion

This movement of bodies and minds heralds as great a shift in social learning as the emergence of printing at the end of the medieval period in Europe. Inquiry, academic or otherwise, is being reconfigured to embrace complexity, curiosity, multiplicity, intercultural inclusivity, ethical and moral reflection, environmental sustainability, collaborative citizenship, long-term futures thinking, paradox, and uncertainty. This transformation is being facilitated by social media, but the dynamic for the change comes from the shift in universities themselves to mass education for utilitarian goals. The university has ceased to be a conducive site for reflection on the things that really matter to humanity.

A winnowing is occurring in which the kernel of the liberal dream has been freed from its cultural moorings. In a sense useless knowledge has gone feral, entering the cultural life-stream of communities that are emerging as polyversal sites of creativity and innovation. The magic of learning never dies. It is part of who we are as human beings. With this shift in the form and function of the university, the old image no longer meets its current modus operandi. Times change and new forms emerge.
References


