Blueprints of Distress?: Why Quality Assurance Frameworks and Disciplinary Learning Cannot Sustain a 21st-Century Education

In today's world the atomization of knowledge and the sheer speed with which new information is created have challenged the discipline-based organization of universities and shifted scholarly practice and student learning from a preoccupation with being to one of doing. Utility, applicability, and entrepreneurialism have emerged alongside wisdom, deliberation, and collegiality as the academy's cardinal virtues. Gigs have usurped careers. Artificial intelligence and automation threaten to lay waste to vast swathes of the employment sector. Casualisation has wiped away what were once standard benefits packages and employer matching contributions, and a hotter, drier and more crowded Earth makes for a more tense and fractious world.

What sounds like the dystopian backdrop to a work of science fiction now sets the greatest challenges and opportunities that face universities and the students they teach. It has been said, however, that while the world has problems, universities have disciplines (Alvargonzález, 2011, 399). It has also been said that only variety and complexity in preparation can cope with variety and complexity in life (Hodgson, 2012, 521). Such truisms have to give us pause because they circle the questions that confront and trouble each university and the graduates they produce. But where a student might honestly wonder how he or she is going to make it out there with a BA or a BSc, universities have to ask themselves whether or not present-day degree programs are fit-for-purpose to prepare the precariat for the world they will inherit.

Higher education policy across the Anglosphere has tended to cast academic study and the creation of new knowledge in terms of contributing to the modern knowledge economy that knits nation-states around the world into a global community. Faith in Cold War-era ideas about comparative economic advantages such as possession of oil reserves or

iron deposits that favoured one ideological bloc against another have given way to strategic preoccupations with the knowledge economy's four cornerstones--scientific expertise, innovative potential, workforce education and the multi-lateral distribution of public and private power (Drucker, 1993). Today wealth and security derive less from geopolitical alliances and more from connections forged between very particular people—transculturally creative and technologically adept holders of tertiary degrees—and very particular places—globally-networked conurbations that compound multicultural mass with intellectual capital (Moretti, 2013).

To increase productivity in a world dominated by multicultural and well-educated urban centres requires the application of knowledge to innovation and the achievement of such innovation entails the constant processual development of other kinds of knowledge pursuant to the global race for adaptive, rather than comparative, economic advantage. Governments and, in turn, publicly-funded universities have concentrated, centralised and scrutinised the production of such knowledge and creativity in order to connect learning inputs and outputs to national strategic imperatives through the mechanism of extensive and intricate learning and teaching quality assurance frameworks. Critics, however, have charged that what they deride as 'bureaucracies of audit' (Hussey and Smith, 2003, 367) conflate a particular managerial ideology with the concept of educational quality and enact the contradiction that to produce well-educated, creative and innovative citizens requires prescriptive norms, template-driven processes and distrust of what we might somewhat naively but wholly sincerely call the magic of learning and teaching.

The recent L&T managerial turn emerged out of a business model developed in the 1970s. Principal-agent theory asserted that communities of rational interest form between those with an interest (students) and those who can fulfil that interest (teachers). The calculations that the theory presupposed on the part of the system's constituents lent

themselves to levels of quantification that implicitly devalued individuals in favour of the system's over-arching instrumental logic. Individual experience, insight and judgement, for example, lost their place in the modern L&T landscape (Muller, 2018, 49-51). Instead, policy-driven and data-supported standardisation and measurement have valorised predictability, scalability and comparability to ensure an illusory consistency across intra-university degree programs and across the broader university sector (Hussey and Smith, 2002, 2008). No matter Goodhart's Law—'When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure (Koehrsen, 2018)'— the basic critical observation that calculation has replaced imagination obtains across much of the sector (Muller, 2018, 61).

In a way, that fictive creation of neo-classical economics, *Homo economicus*, was set loose in the classroom by means of two technologies, the learning outcome and the rubric. Learning outcomes capture in advance in a single statement, typically beginning with an imperative action verb, the content or attribute the student will learn and what the student will be able to accomplish with mastery of the promised content or attribute. On the other side of the learning outcome the instructor comes to know what and how to teach towards a set of five to seven specific end-points (Liu, Bridgeman and Adler, 2012; Allgood and Bayer, 2017; Caspersen and Frølich, 2017). Rubrics operate as a subset of the learning outcome because they stipulate and quantify what, on the part of the client, will be measured and assessed by the instructor in any given activity. They make explicit what is to be learned and how the learning will be measured against fixed criteria and then translated into a numeric grade (Janssen, Meier and Trace, 2015; Greenberg, 2015).

Professional opinion on learning outcomes and rubrics, however, is so mixed that it is hard to understand how such contentious and unproven technologies have garnered sector-wide acceptance and determinative power. While their advocates and critics both acknowledge that the learning and teaching apparatus facilitates managerialism, its advocates

endorse how it shifts the premises of the academic enterprise away from collegial governance, academic autonomy and the process of learning ever more inexorably towards prescribed outcomes and measurable results. Critics, however, dread such intrusions and the instrumentalism that results (Bailey, 2014). Advocates of learning outcomes and rubrics also tout the ability of such technologies to reduce the cognitive load that stresses students when they have to learn too much in any given course (Reddy and Andrade, 2010). Key to reducing such loads are the rubric's and the LO's power to distinguish for the student between what truly matters from what does not (Greenberg, 2015). Such discrimination, critics have argued, runs counter to anything remotely resembling curiosity and fosters the practice of teachers and clients gaming the system by mastering not a body of knowledge but a particular set of points that foreclose other possibilities by stipulating what will be learned before the learning has even begun (Hussey and Smith, 2002, 2003; Brooks et al, 2014; Kenworthy and Hrivnak, 2014). In the end, their advocates cannot point to any empirical evidence that supports conclusively their assertion that LOs and rubrics enhance learning and teaching (Greenberg, 2015, 211).

The dispute puts me in mind of a phrase that I read years ago in my work as a historian that haunts my thinking about the relationship between confidence, planning, policy and behaviour. Imperial invaders loved maps and crafted them to depict, whether the subject was a town, a region or a hemisphere, the imposition of colonial order and claims to ownership through the expression of meridian lines, urban grids and other indices of imperial dominion over supposedly "savage" peoples and landscapes. One of the world's leading historical anthropologists, in reflecting on such documents, remarked that far from expressions of power and control, such cartographical fantasies were, in fact, 'blueprints of distress (Stoler, 2002, 157).' The distress the maps sought to mask resided entirely in the minds of the colonisers who projected their self-image of civility and control whenever they

encountered people or places they could neither perceive nor name nor understand. Rubrics, degree maps, learning outcomes and most other modern technologies associated with curriculum and pedagogy are blueprints of distress of a different kind because they rest on the assumption that if an education is not named, planned, measured and controlled then there is no learning to be had.

If the managerial L&T regime has a curricular counterpart, it is perhaps the academic discipline which works as a blueprint of distress of another kind. In their origins Europe's universities sought to capture within four square walls the sum total of all knowledge of the glories of God's creation (Max-Neef, 2005). Over a couple of centuries of global exploration and the pillaging of other people and places, new ways of thinking, knowing and being arose that overthrew medieval academic tradition and replaced the assumption of knowledge's sacred unity with an Enlightenment model rooted in ideas of control, progress, objectivity and the disaggregation of knowledge into disciplines which entailed a particular structure for universities that still stands (Trouillot, 1991; Blaut 1992; Murray, 2000).

Organizations based on disciplines embody certain values and assumptions about knowing and being and are underwritten by a faith that knowledge is best discovered and created when reduced. They are poorly equipped to confront complex questions because in their very origins they were intended to sit upon one set of epistemological principles, to take into their field of vision one particular set of questions and sources, and to generate new knowledge that comported with professional or academic expectations framed by the limits that defined the discipline in the first place. Such a model that valued disassembling the world and studying its components in isolation suited social needs and cultural imagination at a point in time when social relationships were far more hierarchical and it was thought wise to reduce complex questions to their simplest constituent parts. But such an approach copes poorly with the world we inhabit today where a democratic social media campaign can topple

established elites in a fortnight, where perhaps half of the careers of the future do not yet exist, where individuals live as aggregations of polyvalent identities and where a substantial portion of political and cultural power resides not so much in truth but in its demolition.

The earliest efforts to overcome the limits of disciplinary inquiry sought to create hybrid methods to lend to teaching and research a breadth of vision and complexity of method more adept at taking in a fuller sense of the world. At the same time, they set themselves atop what was already known—the discipline. According to the conventional typology, multidisciplinarity stands one rung higher than disciplinarity because its practitioners seek to synthesize two or more disciplinary approaches and yet they depend upon the legitimacy of the participating disciplines to establish multidisciplinarity's *bona fides*. Multidisciplinarity, however, falls short of creating the level of complexity that the world requires because it only raises one's perspective from one level of reality to maybe two or three. It also involves a kind of transactional borrowing of methods or ideas as opposed to any kind of transformative reformulation of how questions might be asked or knowledge might be created. At the same time, and this is no small part of the extraordinary sway that discipline-based organizations holds in higher education, disciplinarity undermines or calls into question the expertise and authority of those who might dare to practice multidisciplinarity (Marques, 2008; Alvargonzález, 2011). If you have tried it you will know what I mean. Interdisciplinarity takes multidisciplinarity one step further because it leads to the transfer of knowledge between disciplines which tends towards new kinds of synthesis as seen in such hybrid fields as ethnohistory, emotional geographies, or medical humanities. The problem is that neither next-level approach to information synthesis and knowledge creation ever truly breaks away from its disciplinary forebears. To be sure they seek to transcend discipline but at the same time, because they depend on disciplines for their own existence, they leave intact, in terms of both legitimacy and salience, the particular disciplines that

enable them no matter the hybrid journals, conferences and courses that they might have spawned over the past few decades (Soussloff and Franko, 2002; Klein, 2004; Ramadier, 2004).

Beginning in the 1970s transdisciplinarity claimed a position atop the discipline-pyramid as the most broad-minded effort to confront the complexity of the world we inhabit. Like multi- and interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity depends on a solid base of disciplinary knowledge but its practitioners propose, at the same time, to transcend disciplines in order to create something wholly new. What distinguishes knowledge creation in transdisciplinary practice from its multi- and interdisciplinary counterparts, is that rather than try and mitigate the disaggregation of knowledge that derives from disciplinary practice by drawing together two or three disciplinary approaches, transdisciplinarity seeks the articulations between and beyond things because it is in the interstices where ambiguity lies that new questions can be asked and new knowledge can be created (Klein, 2004; Ramadier, 2004; Jahn, Bergmann and Keil, 2012). Practitioners of transdisciplinarity assert the absence of a single truth because truth is premised on the subject's negation through a quest for objectivity that must perforce render the multidimensional subject into a unidimensional object. Instead they grapple not just with a multiplicity of things to know but also with a multiplicity of ways of perceiving so that no one thing is necessarily real but rather defined by its articulations with other subjects' perspectives or interpretations. Anything we can know will therefore always be contingent on something else, leaving one to ask, wholly reasonably, upon what solid ground can one ever actually stand? But such too is the basic predicament of life (Giri, 2002; Alvargonzález, 2011; Nicolescu, 2014; Augsburg, 2014).

Transdisciplinarity reverses the usual tendency to reduce and to simplify and instead seeks to build composite pictures of questions premised on a belief that diversity and unity comprise a progressive and almost spiritual dialectic of knowledge creation (Nicolescu,

2014). That holistic and dynamic principle marks a point from which we can depart the composite world of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century disciplines, a late-twentieth-century business management ideology and twenty-first-century quality assurance frameworks and the "either/or" assumptions that unite and frame them all. But if we head in the direction toward which transdisciplinarity points, we might be able to assay the more ambiguous yet nuanced terrain of "both/and" and locate a more complicated understanding of how information is synthesised and how new knowledge is created as a function of what we might conceive as relational ecologies of knowledge (Guattari, 2000).

But what is a knowledge ecology?

It is an approach for which Emily Potter first advocated in 2004 in which no one discipline or perspective stands alone because they are all implicated in an ever-widening web of what we might call 'knowledge-becoming (101).' Imagine, for example, a capstone course or a collaborative project on an issue of public interest—our ageing population. Then pose a question…'How do we ensure a humane life for long-term care residents?'…and constellate groups of students around the question. One student might synthesize the anthropology of age while another could learn about indigenous understandings of elders and clan. Design students might brainstorm ideas for accessible living spaces with education students who could identify parallels between wise practices in socialising first-time students and first-time residents. A literary study of mortality, health science analyses of the mental and physical processes of ageing, and a communications or an IT perspective on networks and belonging might round the ecology out. Such is but one way that the knowledge ecology concept can reframe how we approach a class or a project and, at the same time, achieve impactful social engagement and thought-leadership in the knowledge economy.

But whereas the *knowledge economy* alienates knowledge from its environment and renders it as an objective, efficacious and globally transactionable good, a *knowledge ecology*

braids the process of creating knowledge with the place where the knowledge is created and, above all, the people who collaborate to create it such that it retains an original slant, specificity and flavour. It is the university as *terroir*. Much of modern scholarly practice, however, aims to elide the individual an the particularities of place from the interpretation in order to gesture towards, if not altogether achieve, what transdisciplinarians regarded as that unwholesome fiction of objectivity that can only be had at the expense of the meaningful subject. What has been lost in western knowledge's search for interpretive distance is much of the stuff that makes for a more fulsome engagement with oneself and with another person's ideas. One's social position, cultural identifications, methodological preferences, emotional states, and a thousand other things all shade to one degree or another whatever interpretive findings one reaches or questions one poses (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999; Montuori, 2008; Jewkes, 2012). A knowledge ecology, however, allows such variables to figure into the ways in which we confront and transmit knowledge through a kind of individualised auto-epistemology that informs an equally individualised auto-hermeneutics which cannot be captured by either a rubric or an outcome because they are wholly unique to the interiority of the student and their particular connections to learning and the people with whom they learn (Augsburg, 2014; Carter et al., 2014). In such a way the curriculum becomes at once an irreducible whole comprised of different approaches to the organising question, autobiography, biography, and the interplay of social and personal narrative (Guattari, 2015).

Narrative learning is fundamentally creative given one's pivotal role in the creation of both a sense of self and a sense of one's world and its implication in the constitution of others. Like any creative endeavour, it must necessarily proceed at times ambiguously or non-linearly for such is the way life so often unspools (Clarke, 2001). The juxtaposition of order and disorder and self and other, all of which are contingent in different ways and at

different times upon each other, marks the signal feature of a knowledge ecology that relies on the teacher's and the students' senses of self appearing in several places at once—within one another and as a kind of teeming collective. To stipulate in such a system particular outcomes or frameworks would be to preclude the possibilities that arise from spontaneity and serendipity and that are best channelled through the teacher-student relationship in the moment and on the ground rather than as it might have been planned, listed and approved by different layers of management months before (Hussy and Smith, 2002; Buss, 2008). Through the process of narrative learning students can assess themselves critically so that when they engage the world they understand whence they have come, where they want to go, who they can be, and how they can get there in ways that comport with their values, skillsets, personal idiosyncrasies, strengths and weaknesses (Arum, Roksa and Cook, 2016, 15-16).

Rather than spawning thousands of minimally prepared practitioners of disciplines through the practice of majoring in 3-year bachelor degrees, universities might better serve students by first preparing them to simply be ecumenical problem-solvers who at the same time have come to know themselves, each other, their world, and the ecologies of knowledge upon which their particular university sits. The first objection to such an approach might be that students need firm disciplinary grounding in order to even begin undertaking responding to such questions. But maybe not. With the credential inflation that has followed the Anglosphere's political and policy response to the knowledge economy, bachelors are no longer going to be the typical terminal degree for entry into the modern workplace. Rather it will be some form of postgraduate training, and so postponing deep engagement with discipline to a postgraduate program might enable younger students to grow their own independence, creativity, and capacity to teach themselves before abseiling over the disciplinary drop rather than the system which we now have that puts them into a discipline and, from the start, hives them off from a knowledge ecology to which they could belong.

But a disciplinary grounding might also turn out not to matter once we release ourselves from such deeply-set moorings. That is part of the excitement that comes with trusting rather than fearing an open-ended process of learning and then fighting that inclination to map our distress in rubrics and LOs.

It is something of a cliché of KPI-driven systems that they value only what they can measure. The corollary, however, that if something cannot be measured then it cannot be managed is absolute bluff because immeasurable people, transformations and ideas are managed every day. Rubrics and LOs create a kind of self-referential loop by insisting upon only those behaviours and practices that they can measure to feed into the compliance machine which is an altogether different thing from getting at the heart of what makes teaching and learning and the cosmos of the classroom so particular to time, place, people and the process that assembles them in knowledge ecologies. Such variables constitute the power of teaching and learning, not frailties to be overcome by over-management, not idiosyncrasies to be mitigated by normative standards, and certainly not rhizomic intricacies that need to be pruned into blunt and serried bullet points, framed by action verbs and plonked into matrices of squares, columns and rows.

The university sector faces ever-increasing competition over a fairly fixed global pool of students and, in terms of teaching and learning, has lost its nerve in the face of the future. In a way, universities and students face together the same unstable and unpredictable world where it will take confidence and practised autonomy to thrive. To ensure that we prepare students and ourselves for what awaits, we have to put away those blueprints of distress and instead align our values, practices and programs with the outcomes not that we expect instructors to impart to students but that instructors and students will create together in a complex engagement with the world's problems, as opposed through the fractal view afforded by the university's many disciplines. If a member of academic staff cannot

experiment creatively or entrepreneurially with a course design, how can we expect students to imbibe entrepreneurialism and creativity? If the time it takes for an instructor to get a new course up and running prevents the instructor from capitalising on a propitious moment, then we cannot inculcate in students the ability to pivot quickly in response to fleeting opportunities. If our programs are over-structured and inflexible, we constrict students' capacity to write their own lives across curricula. Students will not dare to experiment with courses or assessments if we do not. What competencies they need--cosmopolitan creativity, multicultural literacy, engaged citizenship, assured adaptability, lateral leadership skills and an almost adsiciplinary approach to knowledge—can never be accounted for in a set of learning outcomes or in a handful of rubrics but they can be acquired when the classroom approximates the complexities and vicissitudes of life and when we trust the academic staff we have hired and the students whom we have admitted to commit to the process moreso than the outcome.

The current L&T regime, however, fosters in academic staff and students a timidity that frets about what ought to be learned and how such learning can be predicted and measured and an instrumentalism that discerns between what ought to be kept and what ought to be chucked out of one's unbearable cognitive load. It teaches students to fear what they do not know when anxiety and uncertainty will be the cardinal feature of their modern lives. When we insulate them against the confusion that follows from ambiguity and uncertainty we deny them the opportunity to develop the most basic competency they will need—the protean capacity to create order out of chaos and knowledge out of information. If we continue to allow students to conceive of themselves as clients and universities as providers in a system mediated by self-interest, we will at some point have to explain to them why they have purchased a service that in spite of all of its over-management, over-measurement and consequent cost has not prepared them for life as they will live it.

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