First and foremost: Learner autonomy in the first year

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Abstract

We often speak about learner autonomy in higher education as something that is first and foremost what we want students to attain. This is often translated into the notion of independent or self-directed learning. The step-change from school education to the first year of higher education is often considered as a transition point in this direction. However, the educational process is not exclusively an independent solitary activity, but rather involves learning with and from others, or learning communities as they are now sometimes called. Knowledge and skills are developed with respect to public criteria in ways through which understanding can be displayed and assessed. It is also the case that we want students to develop themselves vis-à-vis what they learn, to move beyond considering education as a process of straightforward knowledge acquisition to one of change and growth. This may be considered in terms of professional socialisation, personal development or some combination of both through the development of graduate attributes. However, often the goal of the first year in Scottish higher education is to provide students with a disciplinary grounding that can enable them to then later move towards greater independent learning. For all the recent focus on personalisation of learning, much of the curriculum and pedagogy in the first year is perhaps still devoted to knowledge acquisition.
The aim of this paper is to consider the challenges in building learner autonomy through the first-year curriculum such that students can begin to relate their personal relationship with knowledge to that of wider public criteria.

Introduction

The issue of personalisation of learning has become a major aspect of pedagogical development in higher education. This has, to a large extent, come about due to increased participation, which has brought with it a much more diverse student population. It is also the case that there has been some discussion about the effects of an expanded higher education system that has centred on the related issues of student engagement and empowerment. However, it is also the case that the notion of personalisation has to some extent arisen in a service culture, and particularly with respect to changes in a variety of public and private sectors. It is in this context that it has become associated with the idea of customisation, such that clients or users receive a service that is tailored to their individual needs or requirements. The idea of delivering a mass customised service was discussed by Davis (1987) in his book *Future Perfect*, in which he suggested that mass-market products or services were not in themselves enough anymore, and that the individualisation of these was the way forward, while still delivering to a mass market. In other words, customers would be able to modify or have control over the product or service in some way or other in order to personalise it for their own purposes. For example, one of the most common applications of this model is in mobile telephone usage, where the same product or service can be personalised in various ways. Likewise, in the service sector there has been a shift towards clients or users having some degree of agency and control over the service with which

they are provided. This has been particularly the case with respect to public services such as medical provision, where the agency of client groups has been asserted in such a way as to create a shift towards more market-like conditions.

The provision of higher education has also been affected by this change in culture. However, unlike other public service providers, personalisation is not perhaps so much regarded as a means of offering customised provision - setting aside the extent to which this is possible or desirable. Given the focus on engagement and empowerment, commentators on the changing nature of higher education such as Ron Barnett have suggested that 'will to learn' is something that the sector needs to focus on in terms of students' personal qualities, such as persistence and a sense of self-realisation through learning. Barnett is clear that this focus will stand students in good stead as they enter what is a speeded-up and constantly shifting knowledge economy and society. This leads him to argue that:

> The fundamental educational problem of a changing world is neither one of knowledge nor of skills but is one of *being*. To put it more formally, the educational challenge of a world of uncertainty is ontological in nature. (Barnett, 2006, p 51)

It is evident from these words that Barnett links higher education to the changing nature of a globalised world. Others too have also drawn attention to what they consider as the challenges and problems associated with these seismic changes. For example, Beck (1992) highlights the effects of these in terms of our perceptions of insecurity and risk. The ways in which individuals are now encouraged to consider their employability with respect to 'the market' (Sennett, 1998), and the concomitant effects this has in terms maintaining one's flexibility, have also been raised. Thus, while the individual has a much greater sense of agency, there is also the potential for the creation of anxiety about keeping pace (Elliot and Lemert, 2006; Petersen, 2011). There is little doubt that the recent recession and its effects on employment has raised the status of higher education for employability and the need for graduates to be able to exhibit more than ever flexibility, creativity and entrepreneurialism.

However, while this age may well be one of uncertainty, Barnett has called upon educators in higher education to consider how they can develop curricula and pedagogies that provide students with the qualities to persist, adapt and thrive in this environment. Much of his focus is therefore directed towards how such qualities can be developed, and in doing so this connects with current thinking on graduate attributes. However, the focus on the personal also raises questions about learner autonomy as an overarching metanarrative for the development of graduate attributes. What is the relationship between students and the knowledge they acquire, and how does the blurring of the public/private boundary aspect of this relationship impact on associated rights and responsibilities? In other words, there is a concern with the relationship between knowledge acquisition and its role in personal and public life. Nowhere is this more apparent than at the point of transition into the first year, for it is in this year that students become acquainted with the 'higher' nature of higher education. This is not just a step-change in intellectual content but also in the expectations associated with being an autonomous learner.

Graduate attributes, learner autonomy and the knowledge society

This move away from the almost exclusive focus on higher education as involving the transmission of knowledge to a growing focus on learner autonomy and the transformative nature of higher education has been a strong feature of the Graduates for the 21st Century Enhancement Theme. Set within this has been an attempt to think through how graduate attributes can be developed that meet the needs of a rapidly changing world. Johnston (2010) poses a series of questions that map out the terrain for this with respect to the first-year experience and beyond in terms of more radical pedagogical and curricular changes. For example, he asks:

> How will students *engage* educationally with the questions raised by the 2008-10 economic crisis? Will they be satisfied with a curriculum of disciplinary specialisms and

> 'employability'-relevant skills, or will they be seeking a broader experience, which is relevant to the issues of the day?
>
> How should higher education *empower* students to engage academically, and in a wider social sense, with such issues, the better to bring about change? The potential contrast between the narrow 'job'-focused employability of recent years and a wider 'citizen development' perspective is stark, and is also very exciting in its potential. (Johnston 2010, p 119)

These questions go to the very heart of what graduate attributes are being developed for and the nature of university education. It has long been recognised that learner autonomy is a crucial feature of these attributes in terms of such aspects as self-regulation of learning and time management, the ability to generate one's own sense of enquiry, and the development of academic skills in making connections between conceptual knowledge and practice. However, given the points made above about the rapidly changing nature of knowledge society and economy, then learner autonomy also involves the ability to adapt to change and to be able to evaluate different kinds of knowledge. In addressing this aspect it is worth returning to Ron Barnett (2011), who writes:

> In a world of liquid knowledge, where knowledge has become knowledges jostling and even competing with each another, there are knowledge spaces: universities can approach knowledge - and are doing so - in radically different ways. (Barnett, 2011, p 32)

It is therefore arguable that universities need to consider learner autonomy as something that needs to be developed for and beyond the knowledge society in an effort to preserve the standing of higher education as a public good. This is perhaps a counterbalance to a focus on the corporate ends of the knowledge economy and the at times excessive mantra of preparing the 'knowledge workers' of the future. Universities have contributed more than their share in preparing graduates for the economy, but they have perhaps been less successful in developing the attributes of citizens who are able to advance the general democratic quality of their society and workplace.

This question is now being addressed with respect to the role of new technologies and the notion of 'educational futures'. For example, Facer (2011) argues that there are a series of taken-for-granted assumptions about the future of education founded upon the notion of transformation and modernisation to adapt young people for the challenges of a global digital knowledge economy. However, she goes on to suggest that this is too narrow a focus, and instead makes a case for recognising the challenges that the coming decades may bring, including new relationships between humans and technology, the opportunities and challenges of aging populations, the development of new forms of knowledge and democracy, the challenges of climate warming and environmental disruption, and the potential for radical economic and social inequalities. These sociopolitical changes are key aspects of what an undergraduate education should address. They are not tangential to it.

The primary task of higher education is to make it possible for students to develop a sense of learner autonomy and to connect with sociopolitical processes. This is the very sort of argument that is now being deployed in justifying higher education for the knowledge society rather than merely the knowledge economy. It still leaves the agenda question. What do students need to know in order to extend the democratic quality of life and to participate in the knowledge society? Perhaps the best way to think about this is to regard learning not simply as something that one does in order to acquire or accumulate knowledge, but rather to think of it as something that is created, challenged and appropriated in the course of learner transactions, whether these are with other students and lecturers in class or with various texts (including electronic media). This moves higher education in a more transformative direction, away from the narrow focus of flexible learning for the knowledge economy or as a form of investment in future-proofing themselves for a rapidly developing and risk-laden knowledge economy.

The changing nature of the first year

We live in an era in which the 'active learner' has become accepted as the fundamental goal of education. While there have been benefits to a move away from more 'traditional', didactic pedagogies in terms of eliciting involvement and participation, perhaps less attention has been paid to academic engagement as a sustained activity involving intellectual labour in the form of learner autonomy. Activity is one thing but a sense of agency with respect to an engagement with knowledge is another. It is perhaps the development of the latter where it is possible to place the 'higher' nature of higher education.

The Graduates for the 21st Century Enhancement Theme has attempted to place the first year within a broader, more integrated context. This has been accomplished in different ways and through various fora, and there is little doubt that the overwhelming message to come out of this work is the need for students in the first year to begin to take on the mantle of independent learning from the word go. It is therefore possible to summarise developments to date that further this goal. These include:

- engaging students in this crucial transition year, through for example initiatives related to personalisation of the curriculum and the utilisation of assessment to begin developing academic literacy
- an explicit recognition that 'hand holding' is not beneficial to first-year students and can backfire by creating a culture of academic dependency and lead to students considering themselves as consumers
- the replacement of the above with an educational culture in which first-year students are actively encouraged to view personalisation of their learning as being an apprenticeship for engaging in a process of lifelong learning
- a move away from a mass customised service that simply involves various opportunities for 'activity' towards a more holistic approach that links this early-stage work to the development of learner autonomy within a broader knowledge framework
- exposure to different forms of knowledge in order to develop skills of independent thinking and evaluation, and also to learn to put views and perspectives across in a way that immerses them in a democratic exchange of knowledge.

There are already signs that this is indeed happening, for example through the restructuring of first-year curricula to include a greater focus on multidisciplinary problem-based learning, or through the introduction of modules or elements in courses that offer broader perspectives on what is being learned. This is not an easy task, given that many students come into higher education with an assumption that specialisation of knowledge is what they will be offered. However, as has been argued earlier, there is a strong generalist tradition in Scottish higher education and this should not be lost given its benefits in the acquisition of a broad-based understanding of the world. In other words, what is being advocated is the notion of a tradition adapted to a modern age.

Whatever changes are made to the first year, it would be wise to take into consideration the changing context in which the first year will be delivered. Some of the most pressing changes in this context include:

- changes in schooling as a result of the Curriculum for Excellence that will result in entrants to the first year who will have undergone a more interdisciplinary curriculum and mode of learning. In what sense will these be more autonomous learners who make the transition into higher education more effectively than at present?
- the effects of the current economic climate and the pressure to find efficiencies. What effects will this lead to in terms of the impact upon the first year?
- the increasing use of new technologies such as 'mobile learning' and the increasing use of various social networking media. Will this ease pressure on physical and human resources in terms of the challenges associated with large first-year classes?

- the 'working through' of graduate attributes within undergraduate programmes and the problem of their assessment. Will Scotland follow the Australian example of profiling attributes and how will these be evaluated during the formative stage of the first year?

These are not easy questions. However, one thing is clear: the level of engagement in the higher education sector with the Graduates for the 21st Century Enhancement Theme is wide-ranging and touches all aspects of the student experience. Perhaps the first year more than any other stage in undergraduate education is the one where the most challenges and scope for radical development lie.

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