Theology and the Outcomes-Based Curriculum: the Value of ?Not Kn owing?

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Journal Title: Discourse

ISSN: 1741-4164

ISSN-L:

Volume: 5

Number: 2

Start page: 49

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Introduction

In 2003, the then Minister for Education, Charles Clarke, is reported to have dismissed learning for learning's sake as 'a bit dodgy' and described scholars working in the humanities as 'ornamental' and 'an adornment to our society.' He asserted that the state ought to fund only those higher education courses that could be argued to have a 'clear usefulness' for the British economy.[1] This emphasis on the marketability of higher education has led to the valuing of product (or outcome) over and above process/experience. Education?or rather 'knowledge'?according to Clarke, is only 'useful' if it can be measured by narrowly defined outcomes, and if it can be exploited for the world of work.

In this paper, I argue that such a materialist and utilitarian understanding of higher education is deeply impoverished, and I will assert that theological education, when it is at its best, has less to do with the acquisition of 'useful knowledge', and more to do with exposing students to the uncertainties and the unknowns of our world. A genuine

theological education provides the necessary space for open inquiry?inquiry that is not cut off by overly prescribed ou tcomes ?one that allows students to begin their life-long discovery of the unexpected, the unknown. For how students ch oose to respond to not knowing will have more to do with the kind of people they will become than any measurable knowledge they may acquire.

Knowledge as 'Saleable'

More than twenty years ago, Jean-François Lyotard saw the emerging trend towards utilitarianism in higher education. I n ***The Postmodern Condition*** he wrote,

> The question (overt or implied) now asked by the professionalist student, the State, or institutions of higher education is no longer 'Is it true?' but 'What use is it?' In the context of the mercantilization of knowledge, more often than not this question is equivalent to 'Is it saleable?' [2]

This emphasis on the saleability of education implies a fundamental shift in the understanding of what knowledge is or what it means 'to know'. Knowledge, in the context of contemporary higher education, has come to be 'understood as a commodity' (Barnett, p.1), something that is purchasable, usable and also disposable. Ronald Barnett, of the University of London's Institute of Education, states that there has been a shift in 'knowing as contemplation to knowing as operation'.[3] Says Barnett, 'If there is a dominant ideology emerging in HE it is that of operationalism.' That is to say, in recent years higher education has been called upon to focus on developing in all students the 'ability to operate effectively in society,' (p. 15); it has been called upon to provide students with the transferable skills and useful knowledge deemed necessary for the workforce.

Some of the words associated with this understanding of knowledge include: skill, competence, outcome, information, work-world, materialist, utilitarian, prescriptive, value-neutral (or presumes to be value-free), purchasable, deployable and disposable. Notably absent here are such terms as wisdom, reflection, truth, understanding and self-awareness (p. 16). These are absent because they are difficult to measure, because they vary from one person to another, because they cannot be prescribed, and because they leave room for uncertainty and unpredictability. Also missing from this view of education is the notion of transformativity?that the student may be transformed, changed in some wa y. In this operationalist approach, there is little sense of education offering the opportunity for?to quote Barnett ag ain?'a genuine transaction, in which not only the student is changed but also the acquired knowledge is transformed in the mind of the student' (p.15).

This materialist approach to higher education, which favours the acquisition of measurable, 'useful' outcomes over the process of transformation, has more to do with 'training' than with 'educating'. The end goal in this approach is to acquire practical, generic skills that can be transferred from one work-place environment to another. Thus, subject-specific content becomes secondary to relevant 'transferable learning'.

There has been concern from the start that the idea behind the development of the QAA subject benchmark statements?which were drawn up to 'provide national standards against which subjects should be measured'?is dire ctly linked to this kind of utilitarian agenda. With the benchmark statements now undergoing a review, Emma Wisby, also of the Institute of Education, sees the dangers of their becoming nothing but a marketing tool, 'focused on the employability of a subject's graduates rather than on its inherent worth.'[4] Writes Wisby, in The Times Higher,

> The standards-based quality assurance framework, introduced by the QAA from 1998, was a significant development. No longer were institutions to be judged against their own aims and objectives. Instead, departments were to be assessed against national standards that set out the learning outcomes students should achieve.

Wisby's research suggests that, when subject groups first developed the benchmark statements, they were keen to protect '"liberal" notions of higher education and academic autonomy'?these were priorities, she says. However, she al so discovered that subject groups,

> considered how their benchmarks would play to students and how they could be used to market their subjects. In so doing they typically looked to graduate employability and "generic skills".

With the five-year review of benchmark statements now underway, the QAAhas called upon those responsible for re-visiting the statements to place greater emphasis on transferable skills and employability. But Wisby warns that subject communities must resist reducing benchmark statements to marketing tools and 'ensure that statements reflect the inherent value of their subject'.

So...the bad news is that the QAA appears to be moving further in the direction of promoting an outcomes-based curriculum that values marketable skills over and above subject-specific content, and training over education. The good news, however, is that?at least so far?the academics responsible for the benchmark statement for theology and reli gious studies have resisted adopting this reductionist and impoverished approach and have managed to draw up a statement that recognises the value of process over product (or outcome) and the transfor- mational aspect of the subject. The TRS benchmark statement says:

> Whatever the subject [Theology or Religious Studies], the acquisition of knowledge and understanding is usually transformative at some level, changing a person's perspectives and often their attitudes. ***The nature of TRS means that studying the subject may have a profound impact on the student's life and outlook***.. (emphases added)

'Beware!' this statement seems to be saying. 'If you do a degree in TRS you might never be the same!' The statement continues:

> The experience of studying this subject may contribute to a student's personal development, transforming horizons by engaging with cultures and societies other than their own, whether ancient or modern. It may foster a lifelong quest for wisdom, respect for one's own integrity and that of others, self-examination in terms of the beliefs and values adopted for one's own life, and not least, the challenging of prejudices.

We note the language here?instead of words such as skill, competence, information, etc., we have wisdom, respect, in tegrity, and selfexamination. What is suggested in the TRS benchmark statement is that the point of studying these subjects is not merely to acquire marketable and useful knowledge but rather to be transformed in such a way as to develop as a useful human being.

Even one of the founding fathers of Utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill, understood the role of the university to be first and foremost about cultivating human beings. In 1867, Mill made just this point in his inaugural lecture at St Andrews University. He said that the object of universities is not 'to make skilful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings...'

> ...what professional men [sic] should carry away with them from a university is not professional knowledge, but that which should direct the use of their professional knowledge...[5]

That is to say, what an educated person ought to carry away with her from university is the discernment and

understanding enabling her to apply 'useful knowledge'.

Not Knowing as the Beginning of Wisdom

But even this is not enough. It is not enough merely to become a useful person, understanding how to apply useful knowledge. A true higher education goes much further. It has to do with challenging beliefs and exposing prejudices. It has to do with opening up the space for the student to ask questions?questions that do not necessarily have an an swer?and providing the opportunity for her to reflect on how she will respond to not having an answer, to not knowing. I would like to suggest here that not knowing?or acknowledging that one does not know (which is an informed 'not kn owing' rather than mere ignorance)? is the beginning of wisdom, and that higher education institutions ought to be a pl ace where students can begin their life-long discovery of the unknowns and uncertainties of our world. Moreover, it ought to be a place where students can begin to reflect on how they are going to respond to not knowing.

In my consideration of the value of 'not knowing', I turn to the greatest of all stories concerning the desire for knowledge and its consequences: Genesis 3: 1-13. In this story, the forbidden fruit is the desire for knowledge and this knowledge, we are told, will bring death. It begins:

> Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent,"We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." (NRSV)

Reading the Genesis narrative closely, we observe something very interesting: eating from the fruit of the tree does not bring the man and woman to a satisfying knowledge of the world; rather, it brings them to an understanding of their own ignorance. It is not that by eating the fruit they suddenly see the world and know; it is that they suddenly see themselves and understand that they do not know?they understand that they are ignorant, imperfect, and finite?that they will surely die. In this moment of revelation, they recognise their vulnerability?their nakedness?and are ashamed. And thei r response curiously enough is to hide: to hide from one another, from God, and also from responsibility (we note that they blame one another: she did it; he did it; the serpent did it).

I wonder, what is the greater sin here in this passage?is it the disobedience in eating the fruit or is it the response af ter partaking? Is it the pair's desire for knowledge, or is it their fear to acknowledge their lack of knowledge?to admit th eir ignorance and vulnerability?

True knowledge, it seems to me, does not lie in the recitation of facts nor in the acquisition of skills; true knowledge has to do with understanding?and facing up to?our human condition. And a true higher education, in my view, has two main purposes: first, it should bring us to an awareness of our finiteness, our limitedness, and remind us that we do not?and perhaps cannot?'know' in any final way. Thus the role of higher education ought to be to disturb, unsettle and dest abilise. Second, it ought to call upon us to make a choice: it should call upon us to decide how we will respond to our imperfect and vulnerable condition.

But much is at risk in this kind of higher education because it cannot make the choice for us. It can demand a response, but it cannot dictate a response. All can go wrong?students can decide that it is too hard; they can make po or choices; they can give up, shrug their shoulders and go home. They can take the easy way out and choose to hide from their ignorance, imperfection and finiteness. This is to say that a true higher education can, and should, expose students to the difficulty of life, to the difficulty of living without 'knowing', but it can only go so far in developing in them the courage necessary to live in a world of unknowns and uncertainties. For this, they must find the faith to risk saying 'I don't know.'

Endnotes

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Created on: May 22nd 2009

Updated on: August 19th 2010