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The Role of the Modern Civic University in Australia: the making of a city region.

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Title: The University's Social and Civic Role: Time for an Appraisal.

A way forward for an engaged university?

Two aspects are considered in this article. First the purpose or re-purposing of the university as a 'civic' institution with crucial connections to its local and regional communities and perhaps its 'value constituents' in the case of faith-based universities. Second the crucial meaning of critical thinking and the curriculum in the universities in its context of the question-what is the university really for? Both aspects we suggest, have implications for learning and teaching precisely in relation to social and civic engagement.

Aspect 1: the civic role and Community Engagement – achieving social justice through education

There exists a long and renowned history of 'civic universities' in the Anglosphere (Watson and Taylor 1998; Whyte 2015; Collini 2015) and they are often compared and contrasted with the 'ancient' universities, sometimes seen

as the repositories of tradition with their rituals, old buildings, formal codes of dress and behaviour. These are unique cultures, very different from modern corporations, let alone globalised digital businesses. The ancient universities looked inwards both in their fortress-like medieval college buildings and in general with regard to the intellectual realm inside the walls (House 1991:45-46). Such universities evoke a picture of timelessness, tradition and age old customs for faculty members as well as the general public which contrasts markedly with the leading role they often play in world university rankings and in research right across the academic spectrum. The civic universities were by contrast founded 'for the people' (in the case of Sheffield) and with the belief that local industries and trade would benefit along with local and regional life and culture. Since the founding era of such universities at the turn of the 20th Century universities have changed enormously. Many are in fact now mega corporations and some are truly global institutions in terms of research and teaching. Increasingly they are regulated and funded by government and increasingly over recent times they have been monetised; subject to financial pressures to generate income and funds. This has changed how universities behave and how they view themselves and it forces consideration of just how the origins and defining purposes of such universities, alongside the many variants of 'modern' universities, are relevant to modern conditions.

In the modern era the civic role of the universities is not separable from the wider questions of engagement since the notion of the 'civic' has itself transmogrified partially into the difficult-to-define notion of 'the community'. That there was a wide belief in the original community-relevant purposes of the university cannot be denied, but the content and meaning of both universities and communities have shifted considerably. How can we define this relationship today? Furthermore, how can we define and develop a

curriculum which will be directly relevant to the great and demanding questions and challenges of the day which are existentially central to our future existence, such as climate change, global poverty and social exclusion? These are pressing issues, especially so since the universities have largely given up the task of delivering adult liberal education and extra-mural studies which once claimed a significant social and civic mission on behalf of parent universities. There persists however, a fundamental human need for knowledge and a social and communal need for intellectual life for which universities are still uniquely equipped to respond. Professional scholarship must in these conditions look beyond the academy to an engagement which is truly modern. It must address the crucial issues and simultaneously educate the learners to be able to confront the difficult questions, rather than turning them into 'snowflakes' who are incapable of facing a threat to their unchallenged selves and ideas. The civic mission of universities is the locus for a critical and questioning curriculum relevant to the absolutely pressing concerns of the modern era. These in fact endanger the global community itself and represent an existential threat to the climate and environment of the planet as well as to social stability and fairness which is needed to build trust and co-operation in a divisive world. The change required cannot be contemplated without the development of engaged thinking skills and talents which it is surely the task of universities to produce.

Universities for students or citizens?

For many universities it seems certain that the civic role is alive and well. In a recent influential study, it was reported that..." Many universities were able to articulate activities that clearly had an impact on the local area and people " (UPP 2018). Local people are often rightly proud of their local university and

this is a world-wide phenomenon. On the other hand, there undoubtedly exists a well of ignorance about universities locally and otherwise, and many people do not know what higher education does for local life and the community. Quite how a university should benefit society and community is a problem that has yet to be satisfactorily resolved at a strategic and coherent level.

Whilst it is difficult to establish categoric functions and activities for universities apropos their civic roles and responsibilities, it is clear that public funding and subsidies carry certain obligations and expectations. What is clear is that few universities have a strategic approach to the needs and population in their area regarding civic activity. Far from being a strategic 'third' activity complementing teaching and research, the civic purpose of universities is often unclear and often of only secondary importance in the hierarchy of functions headed by research and teaching fee generating students.

There is a further yet related difficulty with the notion of civic purpose. What exactly does this mean? Whose purposes are legitimately acknowledged when a publicly funded and endowed, yet private and independent and autonomous institution declares its primary tasks as international excellence in research, scholarship and entrepreneurial development of its business studies faculty? Given the charitable status of and civic origins most universities are we not entitled to ask for more to be achieved in the civic realm? Could there be greater support for government signalling the central significance of higher education for all in many communities which are literally dispossessed and poverty stricken, some of which are within a stone's throw of the often grand civic university campuses? Could there be local representation on university governing bodies and committees and could a shared and co-operative model

be supported, and a more radical model of learning be proposed? (Huxtable and Whitehead 2018) .

If a university is in some meaningful and strategic way to be part of its local and regional community it must be willing to prioritise its relations with that locality. This means more than occupying a campus, more than being a custodian of buildings and artifacts and more than token gestures of support for local events and people. A genuine civic university should express its identity strategically through its core or discretionary activity, according to the UPP Foundation report (2018:5) so that local people can be active in the university and the institution itself can ensure greater contiguity between civic activity and public priorities.

Of course, geography and location can play a decisive and formative role in just how civic a university can be. Issues such as the level and type of student fee charged can also shape perceptions of the university's role and *raison-d'être*. Universities have come to be decisive shapers of local, regional and national cultures and economies and have developed a responsive diversity in many cases. However, at the same time we can note, following Sharon Bell and Glyn Davis (2018), that as far back as 1850 ideas for an Australian university showed a 'path dependency' which imposes homogeneity. The new universities increasingly resemble the old ones in Australia and elsewhere, notwithstanding 'valiant' attempts to redefine their role outside the traditional scholarly model of elite, selective institutions (Holmes 2018). The desire to change and reshape universities is not new and a brief look at what has animated this desire for educational reform might yield useful insights for our future work.

Adult learning and education

For many citizens in many different societies and cultures the experience of a university education or at least some university learning has been only available through university extension courses or extra-mural provision. Cambridge, Oxford and London universities were the pioneers amongst English universities to inaugurate such provision, though the American non-collegiate adult learning movement could claim an earlier mass movement affiliation to learning for a common culture and purpose (House *ibid*: 13-18). By the last decade of the 20th century adult and continuing education was a truly mass higher education experience in the UK, in the USA and in some of the English speaking countries around the globe. It was the extension studies departments that often developed new modes of teaching and learning especially in attempts to bring into higher learning those people who had been denied such opportunities as young people. It was no accident that movers and shakers in the world of learning and scholarship such as E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Michael Young and Stuart Hall were active participants in this aspect of widening participation at this juncture in modern history in the UK and beyond.

This moment in history was paralleled in a most paradoxical way by the growth of mass higher education and expansion precisely of civically aware new universities, which developed from the polytechnics and teacher training colleges which had a local and often focussed relevance to the civic societies in which they were fostered. The English-speaking world globally was of course undergoing the transition to mass higher education and spectacularly so in Australia with its own distinctive cultures evolving in separate yet related developments.

The perhaps most disappointing paradox is that in the last decade there has been a major decline in what previously was an integral part of civic university activity- adult education. In the UK, for example, non-degree courses have declined by 42% since 2012 for students aged over 30. What was once considered core activity and vital to a university's civic role and mission has effectively disappeared or been abolished. There may be two differing explanations for this; first that the introduction of student loans as opposed to grants and fee remissions with conditions on repayment for part-time adult learners has disincentivised potential students. This is likely to add to an evolving problem in the coming years as increasing numbers of professional jobs are automated and where there will be an increasing need for re-training. It means that all kinds of relatively excluded and disadvantaged types of people, such as women returning to work after an absence from the labour market or adults returning to learn through access courses, cannot retrain unless they can pay fees upfront and support themselves from their own resources. The second reason for the decline in adult education may be because 'mainstream' university curricula and learning activity have in effect taken over the agenda and mission of the old 'extra-mural' departments and traditions of adult learning. There may be some truth in this contention in so far as universities may have co-opted flexible admissions policies, adopted second-chance elements within recruitment drives, re-fashioned long courses within modular and credit transfer schemes and generally adopted the new internet-led digital technologies within mainstream learning. Most if not all the great innovations pioneered by the UK's Open University in the 1970s and 1980s are to be seen in every civic university today (Davies 1995). What has changed and is a loss, however, is the focus on the learner which for most civic universities remains the undergraduate late adolescent market and the post-

graduate; these are fee paying young adults, many of whom specialise in vocational and professional courses.

What has been substantially lost is the tradition of adult liberal education and learning which innovated throughout a long and honourable history of struggle to provide alternative routes and means of study to those who had been denied it (House 1991; Kelly 1971). What has continued to flourish in civic universities is 'continuing education', which is overwhelmingly technical and skill-based and the vast majority of people in higher education who are not traditional 18-to 20- year olds are there to acquire skills and qualifications which relate to career and professional advancement. Such education and training is a vital necessity for modern economies and labour markets.

However, beyond its technical/rational content and its relevance to a professional role, important though that is, there is nothing intrinsic to the curriculum of such learning which is liberatory or transformational and in its worst excesses can lead to narrowly confining specialisation. On the other hand, adult liberal education, whilst also concerned with outcomes for individuals and perhaps even community change and improvement, was aware of the existence and needs of the wider society and community. There was what David House called a 'quest for a common culture'- a ...'hunger for wholeness in our culture' (House *ibid*:18-19). The professionalization and fragmentation of our education system has been accompanied by the growth of uncertainty and insecurity, not least for a significant number of graduates who do not get graduate jobs but enter the precariat of insecure work, or self-employment and the zero-hours culture of the gig economy.

The growth of mass popular culture, now burdened by the pervasiveness of digital oppression masquerading as free communication whilst dominating

public attentionality through the myriad screen applications available to all, has changed beyond recognition the status of our common culture. Gone are the attributes and skills identified and analysed by Richard Hoggart's (1959?) influential study on the uses of literacy; replaced not just by the exigencies of 'Hollywoodised' mass popular culture in all its commercialised consumerist forms but gone too are the continuing liberal education programmes rooted in universities and colleges.

The civic role of the university then remains to be re-constructed. There is a continuing demand and need for people to be educated not only as specialists in professions or in skills as practitioners. There is a need for recognition that learning itself is productive and beneficial to individuals and to communities. There are growing numbers of people who are participating in learning which would once have been described as 'liberal learning; these are lay intellectuals or what Gramsci (1971) called organic intellectuals who emerge within the struggles of ordinary people for a better life and future. A society needs an educated population which goes beyond vocational specialisations and the education of the scholarly elite. The continuing growth of the University of the Third Age, the popularity of generic Open University television programming and the uptake of MOOC (massive open on-line courses) world-wide, all show the forceful nature of learning needs. And all of these take place outside or beyond normal university provision and are testimony to the fact that people are motivated and spurred on by the challenges that surround them in life, no matter what stage of life they are at. They want to read a classic text or learn the language they found beyond them at school, they are interested in the poet they never had sufficient time for in their working life and they want to examine the social and political issues that surround them and that confront society. Many are desperate to help in the challenges to our planet that

climate change is bringing; many wish to be part of the solution to global migration, displacement and poverty that threaten our social lives. Many want to challenge the pervasive inequality across nations and cultures which disfigures our current lives and threatens that of the new generations who will be dealing with it. It can be argued that adult learning within its liberal and critical traditions and fostered by civically-minded universities created access to intellectual life that would not have been possible for most people. In doing this universities responded to a fundamental human need for knowledge and in going outside the walls, extramurally in the past, they contributed to social progress in a significant and unique way (Davies 1997). In modernity they must surely review current practice and thinking about how they might renew this mission and meet the new challenges-some of which can be described as existential, for the planet and for the human population.

This new challenge is part of intellectual life which is uniquely both part of and separate from conventional university provision. It requires a new look at the curriculum; we believe it requires a critical curriculum which builds on the achievements of the past yet articulates really useful knowledge for the here and now and it requires a different form of engagement. Perhaps above all it needs to review and renew its relationships with its value constituents- the people for whom it claims it exists. These are more often than not said to be the 'communities' in which and for which the university demonstrates its reason for being.

Community engagement

There are many and varied definitions of 'community' and there are few universities in the world which do not in some way or another seek to relate to

their 'community' or communities. There is thus the risk of using the term community in such varied circumstances that it becomes meaningless. However, we could do worse than to note Zygmunt Bauman's (2001) wry comment that community is a word that has a 'feel'; it is always a good thing! There is also an argument between community and individuality and autonomy; community may offer security but deny us freedom. There can be no perfect community but...' The better may be an enemy of the good, but most certainly the 'perfect' is a mortal enemy of both.

In Australian terms and contexts, we can refer to the community in respect of a set of defined concerns and values. At the risk of generalisation, there is a concern to address the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural character of the Australian people. This task has both a current and historical force as the history of the colonial period shows which may be said to be positive and negative. The place and role of the indigenous aboriginal people of Australia is being continuously reassessed in the evolving context of a multi-racial/ethnic future. A community where an understanding is shared by all its members is sought and where a community of people remain united and bound together in spite of all separating factors. The community in Australia may not have reached its intended destination in this yet but it surely strives for this and it provides a context for university engagement.

The Australian First peoples themselves embody a diverse set of cultures, languages and ethnic markers. The indigenous people exist in their own diversity and unity, but they also stand for the wider meaning of engagement because if it does not deliver for them then how can it do so for those who came after them? If engagement is about social justice, for example, then first peoples are the paradigm case. How universities seek to resolve their own

understanding of and relation to the key historical problem of post-colonial settlement becomes key to unlocking the role of universities in creating a more socially just and fairer society. We can learn from the United States that the legacy of slavery and the racialisation of social and civic life continues long after formal equal rights have been conceded and its effects cut deep over the succeeding generations. We cannot ignore this history; we cannot ignore the contemporary social, economic, ethnic and cultural divisions which bedevil our society in Australia. Like people of goodwill and intelligence everywhere we must grapple with our local expressions of what is a global situation. But Australia is a continent; its universities and the knowledge economy represent perhaps the third greatest producer of national wealth; and the eyes of the world are frequently on Australia as the harbinger of a better post-colonial world. How university engagement and first peoples evolve will be the illustrative case study the world will want to explore and learn from! All eyes are on us...and our next edition of Transform will focus on our First Peoples.

The role of cultural knowledge

There are many ways to pose questions of community and culture and our intention here is to draw attention and recognition to a crucial element for the future of university engagement in Australia. This addresses the need to place first people's homeland, language and culture centrally at the heart of educational experience. The solution to massively aggregated and complicated problems involving the history of colonial and later globalising forces of social and economic change cannot be brought to book in a single bound as it were. Yet there is, as Trudgen and Teare (2018) both in different but allied ways suggest- a way forward. The key is finding the means by which people can control their own lives. This is a question of knowledge and skills which can be

acquired and where lost, re-acquired through a different kind of learning and education. It requires a multi-disciplinary approach which takes in the whole life of a community and one which stresses the innate value of social and emotional capital required for successful living in modernity as much as the economic capital which is thought to be generative of social welfare and prosperity.

This is in fact a type of critical understanding that requires potential students to engage with different and contrasting ways of life, ways of thinking and ways of being. This is a shared task and agenda for those from different ethnic and cultural origins who must share a common future crafted from an exploitative and invidious past.

Control through the medium of learning must be returned to the people and both the content of that learning and the processes and practices through which it is acquired need to radically redefined. This is a vital element of the necessary social engagement of a university in its 'community hinterland'. It can no longer be allocated or demoted to the margins but needs to be a curriculum priority just as it is a social and human priority for any educator who values the health and welfare of the public and civic domain; and we welcome contributions on this major theme to our next Issue of Transform.

Aspect 2: the meaning of critical thinking for the HE curriculum

If culture and community are deeply problematic, this does not mean we have simply abandoned our sense of what community might mean and how it might be relevant to learning. John Berger, the great writer and broadcaster on art and society reminded us that community is one of the longings of our century. (Berger 2016). It retains a powerful charge and seems to offer a framework of

meaning for modern life. But it is culture which connects us to the events ‘out there’. There is no community outside of and beyond cultural forms and practices which make us what and who we are. Yes, there is an essential sense of self for most people and there are collective experiences and identities and some people feel alienated from the collective norms, values, practices and behaviour which we can observe and analyse around us. But it is in the relation of things that understanding emerges, and culture through the various ‘languages’ it employs is the means of relating one thing to another. Without culture and cultural mediation there can be no valid knowledge which can equip us with the power to change our thinking and consciousness and transform (if we so choose) our social and material lives and who knows our human ‘spiritual’ lives as well. It is in this spirit that we are asking in this paper- what is going on around us, where is the leading edge of change and how can we understand this as universities?

Complicated and connected answers risk confusion and diversion however, so we have tried to summarise and bring into an alignment a range of matters which we believe are connected. Our task initially is to describe the issues so as to isolate and highlight things that are in reality not isolated but part of a greater whole. These current and future issues are not the totality of problems faced by the human condition! However, we believe they are the issues facing universities as learning institutions and as innovators in learning. This perspective informs our sense of curriculum innovation and leads us to ask- what are the key learning issues that impact on universities which wish to innovate for change? How can the universities re-think their approach to civic engagement (and entrepreneurship) so as to benefit the community in all its abundant variety but especially perhaps for dispossessed and marginalised

communities? How can we conceptualise an engaged education which is culturally attuned to modernity and all its diversity and opportunities?

One such issue is that of how knowledge gained inside and outside the classroom can engage people and communities in new and meaningful ways. This has been called ‘real knowledge’ (Nyland et al 2015; Davies et al 2016) and ‘engaged education’ (Hymen,2017) and focuses on issues to do with learning and knowledge which meets the challenges of the times in schools, universities, workplaces, communities and life experience. It forces us to engage with the ‘big issues’, sometimes referred to as the ‘wicked issues’ (Firth 2017) – and we signal some of these below.

Poverty is still with us – globally and locally

The ‘real’ world, out there still consists of millions who are without an adequate income to rear their families, a world without dignity or education, without clean water or adequate food and medicine and whose share of world wealth is actually diminishing. There is also a world out there where climate change and pollution are far from improving and where the threat of human extinction is real. The arguments for devising a new curriculum which addresses these issues seems to be self-evident

The marginalisation of young people

The rapid pace of social and economic change, the apparent quickening of mass migration across large parts of the globe, de-industrialisation and the ‘hollowing out’ of many traditional economies and communities have meant the growth of more challenges to the neoliberal consensus in many societies. For many young

people this has meant their future is at risk with youth unemployment and marginalisation the fate of many across the world.

The growth of digital technologies and how we understand what is happening

In a society where knowledge has exploded, learning is being transformed by the artefacts and the apps of the information age. Communications can be instantaneous, and reality becomes 'virtual'. Local communities can become marginalised and impoverished by the almost instant switching of production to cheaper locations, perhaps half way across the globe. There can be no underestimating the sheer power and reach of the new technologies. However, it is one thing to describe the exponential growth of digital machines to almost every living human on the planet and the communication networks which sustain them, and another to overcome the negative effects and disbenefits which accompany them.

Knowledge and learning relevant to life and work

The sheer power and availability of computerised automation has now shifted the nature of work and leisure so fundamentally that it faces us with an existential challenge. Modern work, for many, involves a lack of engagement in the task and even leisure and free time may be occupied by 'lazy' and sometimes aimless pursuits.

The task facing universities is of developing knowledge and skills and a curriculum which can cope with the capacities and threats presented by the machines we depend on and which can help us challenge the loss and separation of ourselves from our communities.

Relevance of community and identity

Ways of learning relevant to a community stress the importance of common identity, shared values and a sense of shared experience aimed at changing and conserving valued traditions. The community, in a sense, may become the curriculum and a belief can emerge in a large reservoir of talent and ability within individuals and their communal experience that can be tapped and released. The university can sponsor learning which revolves around this growing and developing sense of awareness.

The modern university is expected to be many different and contradictory things. It is expected to be an innovator in learning and knowledge; collegial in its dealings with its staff and its partners yet competitive in an increasingly marketised and monetised world; caring in its concern for people yet entrepreneurial in its business dealings; it is expected to be both a public institution and a private organisation and it is almost always both a local and an internationalised institution. This wide array of university roles and identities does not imply that it must be in any sense isolated from its community!

The university and democratic citizen-members?

What then are universities and what are their characteristics that we value? At its heart a university is a community, where academic citizenship can be seen to be central to the idea of membership. A university must surely sponsor recognition of rational and scientific enquiry as the basis for learning, rather than the handed-down dogmas of orthodox belief, and a place where all belief systems are open to scrutiny, dialogue, questioning and critical discourse.

Universities are diverse institutions and to cope with a changing future universities will have to play a fully developed role in the emerging civil society; a society that on a global scale is faced with a series of problems and issues such

as those outlined above. Having indicated some of the directions to which we think universities appear to be heading, we can tentatively suggest that the community must be a focus for engagement, and a university must play its part in improving amongst other things the environment, local education and health and community outcomes.

The new view of the university in its community will also need to embrace the fact that learning will have to be 'social', that is to say it will be shared and will be for a progressive social purpose. That elite higher education systems have paid off for many cannot be denied. However, the next stage requires not merely a scaling up of existing provision but a wholesale re-thinking of learning for those billions of people who can view the benefits of advanced industrial society (via their hand-held devices and computers) but who cannot achieve them. Learning is of course not just a social activity, it is also an intense personal activity. Change yourself and you change your situation is no mean epithet, especially when allied to a notion of a community since all individual action needs to find its appropriate object and community, as we have seen, is one of the longings of our century.

An engaged curriculum for critical thinking

Having considered some of the new contexts for a more vital and engaged civic role the aspect we want to consider now is that of the need for curricular renewal and the idea of critical thinking skills as a feature for all university learning and teaching programmes. We have already alluded to the fact that the

really big issues facing us are somehow marginal to our key concerns with the curriculum. The big challenges of our times are not central to our learning. Peter Hymen (2017) has remarked that “We have a one-dimensional education system in a multi-dimensional world. We are living in an age of big challenges, big data, big dilemmas, big crises, big opportunities. Yet... (education) too often is small in ambition, small in what it values, small in its scope”. He argues that we need something different which can meet the challenges of our times and where we can properly engage with learning. His suggestion is that we need an engaged education which is academic (based deeply in literacy and numeracy and which is empowering); is about character building (involving independence and autonomy, resilience and open-mindedness for the individual), is concerned with creativity and craftsmanship and a can-do approach to innovation (which is about problem solving). These three facets of learning correspond to an education of the head, the heart and the hand and can help us overcome the artificial and self-limiting and debilitating divisions we have between academic, vocational and technical education. Those who experience such learning understand that they have an obligation to apply their knowledge to make the world a better place, not merely to make money, important though that may be in our presently existing world.

What do we need to know?

In an era where billions of people cannot access academic education there is the question of ‘skill’ by which we mean how individuals primarily understand and grasp their environment in order to make it work for themselves. The better this understanding is, the better life can be. Skill is what people develop to survive

and thrive in the environment in which they find themselves. Sometimes this involves changing that environment or seeking an entirely new one. This is a deeply cultural matter. It involves how the individual self attends or relates to the environment which itself is 'cultural'. Some commentators such as Crawford (2015) argue that the environment actually constitutes the self, rather than just impacting on it, and therefore how the individual pays attention to this environment becomes key to succeeding in it. In an internet dominated world the idea of the public attentional world (what and who is on the internet and in our minds and for how long each day) gains some serious traction.

In acting on the world however, (in reality or in virtual reality) we find skill is a key part of the process. " Through the exercise of a skill, the self that acts in the world takes on a definite shape. It comes to be in a relation of fit to a world it has grasped. (Crawford, *ibid*: 25). What is deeply problematical still though, is how public space (including spectacularly the internet) in general diminishes the skill of understanding and acting on that environment. The digital and virtual world is one made up of mediations where our daily lives are literally saturated with representations which are made elsewhere. We make contact with the worlds of work, of family, of friendship, of communication, entertainment, consuming, learning and leisure through the apps and software provided for us. We make contact through, not with, these representations and become 'skilled' at the point of gaining access but we do not make or construct the objects of our desires and we do not become skilled at practices which give us 'agency'. Crawford argues persuasively that it is when we are engaged in a skilled practice that we can understand and own, as it were, a reality which is independent of the self and where the self (the individual as an identity) is understood as not being of its own making. The illusion of the internet is of course to implicitly infer that the virtual reality constructed by the 'individualised' internet software has

precisely been made by and for the individual self. The significance of this insight is we believe that in the encounter between the self and the external world, skill, defined as the capacity to engage with and act on the real world, is the critical element. It embraces the skills of the head, the heart and the hand and above all it means an engaged education is needed in universities.

Skill in this viewpoint becomes a crucial enabling concept because instead of allowing our perceptions and experiences to be determined by and through the internet apps we employ, we can choose to develop skills which express an embodied perception. This means that our knowledge and understanding can be enhanced through our actions not just through mental or intellectual representations which are shaped by the virtual realities provided for us on the digital platforms. In this view, what we perceive, how we understand and how we use knowledge to change something is actually what we do. This is one of the philosophical underpinnings of action learning. Embodied perception according to Crawford is an antithesis of virtual reality; it suggests we can have a self that has expanded through skill rather than just through mental or intellectual effort. Since we live highly mediated lives so we ourselves have been made biddable and 'pliable' to whomsoever has the power to make and shape the representations we consume via the internet and in parts of our public space. Representations are comprised of thoughts, language, symbols, images, narratives and the media themselves which make up the apps and software programmes we consume. Crawford argues "representations collapse the basic axis of proximity and distance by which an embodied being (person) orients in the world and draws a horizon of relevance around itself." The horizon of potential seems to expand exponentially but the circle of action diminishes as each one of us becomes absorbed in the screen in front of us to the exclusion of all else. Even the most densely packed public places will now show the

introverted individual wholly absorbed in a mediated self, fixated to the screen , narcissistically introverted and unaware of the significance of the public domain. There is here both a deficit of attentionality to public social life and conventions and a form of mass psychological 'interpellation' by which the bonds between perception and action are separated.

The powerful mediating institutions which provide our means of accessing life on the internet are not democratically organised and accountable, nomatter how much they assert their right to offer choice in a consumer-driven world. Neither do they offer a world of freedom simply to communicate with whom we wish even though we can reach almost every living human being on the planet with a hand-held device. The 'real' reality is that we make contact almost exclusively now through the representations of people and objects which are provided to us on our devices by the media corporations. We no longer rely on ourselves and our own skills to do this and we are diminished potentially as a result. We are of course 'free' to deny realities and to dissociate ourselves from the effort needed for skilful engagement. If we can pay, there are always others in a market who will provide these things for us.

The matter of skill thus becomes critical for our understanding of what universities might do and how they might re-construct their curricula. This is so in respect of two major objectives: first the need to deliver learning programmes that equip students with critical thinking (as we have defined it in this paper) and second, the need to recognise alternative forms of 'skill' which those beyond the boundaries of conventional universities (ie, the billions in the 'third world') possess but which go largely unrecognised and unrewarded. This would need to embrace the kinds of knowledge and skill which would include Indigenous knowledge in community and civic life.

Critical thinking

If we are then to reclaim the 'real' as against the representations of it which mediate and distort our experience and understanding of the world we need to develop our ideas of critical thinking which can help us overcome the limitations. Critical thinking in its context of education can be defined as rational and practical activity centred on decisions as to what one should do in complex situations. Critical thinkers are likely to be fair, objective and committed to accuracy and clarity (Ennis, 1996). Furthermore they are likely to be able to think about thinking itself, also called metacognition. Critical thinking is also about the impact of ideas and understanding of 'self' and identity since these constructs in different ways shape how an individual interacts with the wider community and society. As Jenkins (2004:56) has argued, developmental psychology has shown that learners who are active in their own right require the work of others to achieve their potential. At the heart of learning processes is the growth of a cognitive and social being who can cope with the challenges of everyday life. Personal identity and social identity are intertwined so that membership of a group, for example, can be part of how individuals can change their definitions of themselves and bring about change in collective life. Such skill as this, for that is what is required to actively engage with others in a conscious and aware manner, is not simply to be taken for granted. It has to be learned and taught and individuals learn by engaging in what Jurgen Habermas (1972) called instrumental, interpretive and critical learning where the latter involves applying critical concepts and ideas so as to 'transform' the objects and subjects of study. Critical thinking is thus about the things we need to think and do to change and transform any given reality into an improved one. It is not neutral thinking in the sense of a disembodied, objective and value-free judgemental process. Critical thinking is not a neutral activity; it is an engaged activity.

There is no specific and subject-based content for critical thinking. It does not reside in a single or cluster of academic disciplines, though the social sciences broadly speaking have done most to develop the notion. Although it is possible to list in a granular fashion the attributes of a critical thinker (Khalaily,2017) and these would include at a high level all of the performance skills to do with reading, understanding, memorising, verbalising, absorbing information, comparing , contrasting, clarifying, investigating and questioning, this would be to miss the true significance of critical thinking . This lies in “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualising, applying, analysing, synthesising, and /or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation , experience reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action....These skills are highly valued in a democratic society” (Khalaily, 2017:57).

Critical thinking is not a unitary phenomenon and it can have differing meanings within its different contexts. For the universities its significance is in the qualities it can develop in the student. For an engaged institution this might mean giving the learner the capacity to separate truth from ideology or ‘post-truth’. It should surely mean not taking things at face value or not letting others make up our minds for us. As Newman (2016) asserts, critical thinking, drawing on critical theory, is concerned with the idea of social justice and fairness and that knowledge can be generated and applied for an improved social result. It involves learning which should lead to an enhanced sense of self in the real world and not just in the virtual world. This means we might expect a more capable individual who is able to relate to others and be personally more responsible and ‘viable’.

In conclusion

Two decades ago it was suggested and debated that there was a crisis of knowledge in the rapidly expanding mass higher education of the western world (Scott 1997). Even if there was such a crisis the author of the seminal volume on it was of the view that academics were competent enough to sort it out (Barnett 1997): they had after all “ epistemological anchorage ”.

Furthermore our knowledge and understanding of the world is advancing.

Disputes were said to exist but they did not get out of hand! Some two decades on we do not perhaps feel so sanguine about knowledge being so safe in the hands of academics. We have seen the creation of new and vast asymmetries of knowledge and power (Mason 2019) and for some, such as the Yolnu, the present is a nightmare where even the right to know what is going on can be denied. In the themes outlined above we suggest an alternative yet complementary view, namely that new knowledge based around action learning and a critically endowed student is vital for the pressing concerns that ‘the world outside our heads’ is demonstrating to us on a daily basis. The modern encounter with the world demands a conjunction of the pragmatic and pressing wicked issues, and a way of knowing that is critical thinking for the current age.

Our view is that there are key themes and issues that need the academy to be a genuine forum for debate and dispute and to engage with the wider world. Universities must therefore incorporate an active dimension to their missions and strategies. The elements of this approach are we suggest: – the re-shaping of the role of public educator so that public knowledge fits the emerging concerns as part of the mainstream university curriculum; the adoption of critical thinking strategies and programmes for all learners so that genuine knowledge can be created in practice; knowledge skills and what counts as knowledge itself needs to be revised especially in respect of marginalised and

alienated communities; attentionality, reflection and awareness need to be placed more centrally in the learning experience of students and applied to the changing and threatening world of digital and surveillance capitalism; and we need to 'do' critical thinking and dialogue which transforms both what we study and the way we study. The object of learning which is the world out there as well as the internal and imaginative life of individuals and groups, and the learner as a thinking subject need to be brought into conjunction. It is in the relation of both object and subject of study that our claim to critical thinking and understanding lies. The university as an open forum for debate and discourse has always to be re-constructed. Knowing the world is an achievement but changing it and demonstrating a capacity to engage is the real question to be asked. Knowing the real world cannot be done entirely within the university and neither should it. It has to be done by engagement.

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