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Special Forum

Critical Thinking: The Galway Symposium on the Future of Universities

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The papers in this Special Forum of AHHE originated as keynote presentations at a Symposium held in June 2008. The event was organized by the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) at the National University of Ireland, Galway¹. The idea for the Symposium was that we would make a break with tradition from the previous, and successful, 5 years of annual CELT conferences which focused on issues to do with learning and teaching in higher education. Rather, the Galway Symposium was intended to encourage debate not just about pedagogic issues, but about the very nature of higher education itself. The aim was to be provocative and to stimulate discussions around the purposes of universities in the 21st century. We called the event 'Critical Thinking: The Galway Symposium on the Future of Universities'.

Critical thinking, of course, has a double meaning. It alludes not only to the type of critical thinking encouraged *within* universities but also *about* universities. Both types of critical thinking could be considered to be core values within higher education. Alison Phipps, in her piece in this issue, says simply but powerfully that in universities, critical thinking 'is what we do'. And indeed, we had many wide-ranging discussions over the course of the two days which raised some fundamentally critical questions about universities in contemporary society.

In developing the Symposium we were motivated in part by the literature on the demise of - if not the university itself – certain characteristics of traditional universities. The changes that have been felt here in the Irish system recently (and for longer in the UK)

¹ I would like to thank all of my colleagues in CELT for their help in organizing the event (especially Grainne McGrath, Bernadette Henchy, Fiona Concannon and Sharon Flynn). Special thanks must go to the Director of CELT, Dr Iain Mac Labhrainn, who provided the title and much of the inspiration for the event.

are associated with the shift from an elite to a mass system. The Irish system is now facing up to some of the challenges that the UK system responded to in previous decades. These challenges include a greater awareness of the impact of world rankings; greater scrutiny over the spending of public funds and concerns about efficiency and value; increasing attention being paid to quality enhancement and assurance; and an awareness of how market values have entered academia. For many academics, these changes bring with them a sense of loss, rightly or wrongly, for what many would consider to be the core values of a university.

The contemporary university, then, has been attacked in the literature in quite dramatic ways and for different reasons. Allan Bloom (1987) and Bill Readings (1996) were amongst the first to take shots over the bow at contemporary universities, and others have followed suit (but often with quite different concerns). However, the Symposium was not intended to simply offer a space for attack. We wanted to open up the dialogue and explore those aspects of higher education (and universities in particular) which are worth preserving. It seems to me that the complexity of modern times and the role of universities within these times are reflected in the articles in this forum.

What I hope will come across to the readers of this special forum is that, in spite of some of the rather trenchant criticisms of the contemporary university made in these pages, all authors share a deep sense of respect for the idea of the university itself. Alison Phipps quotes Scarry (2001) when she writes: 'A university is one of the precious things that can be destroyed', and I believe that each author on the subsequent pages would wholeheartedly endorse that sentiment. Obviously, the identification of what the 'core values' of universities are would not be similarly prioritized by each author, but the space for dissent and for a critical view of universities is vitally important.

Dissent was a key theme in the opening plenary of the Symposium given by Mary Evans. Her eloquent presentation alerted us to the dangers of what she has called 'coercive realism'. Anyone who works in a university today will be familiar with the exhortation that we must understand, and work within, the 'real world'. The reference to the 'real world' implies not only that academic work is in some sense not real, but also that universities would be better placed to contribute to society if they somehow joined the 'real world'. Of course, as Evans argues, the idea that a fixed and 'real' world is out there and is easily definable might be something that we wish to contest. Part of the task of universities, arguably, has been to promote the type of critical thinking which encourages debate about what is 'real'. As Evans suggests, 'ambiguity, doubt, dissent, disorder are valuable and central tenets of the academic process'.

Yet there are ways in which the 'real world' (if we can call it that) can suddenly make itself felt within universities in quite dramatic ways. Michael Shattock's keynote address was a remarkably prescient introduction to the financial crisis which was about to unfold shortly after our event in June 2008. When he gave his talk 'Managing Mass Higher Education in a Period of Austerity', few of us were prepared for just quite how austere

the age was to become. Shattock's piece here is in some senses a forewarning of the 'reality' of an economic crisis but also a plea for universities to sustain their core values during such a crisis. In this regard, he shares with the other authors a belief that the core mission of universities should be preserved, even when others (particularly governments) are encouraging different priorities.

One of Shattock's concerns is the potentially negative impact of the economic downturn on widening access to higher education. This concern is shared by the author of the next paper, Ronaldo Munck. In this article, Munck nicely demonstrates that what many universities do, and should do more of, is engage with the local communities in which they play a vital role. During an economic crisis, community development becomes even more important to society's well being. Munck acknowledges that universities have a role not just within their communities but also internationally. The 'grounded university', with a keen sense of both the local and the global, is well-placed to promote global citizenship as a core element of the student experience.

In establishing 'citizenship' and community engagement as part of the core business of universities, Munck suggests that new and innovative forms of learning and research activities will develop; but these 'will not shift the student as consumer discourse to one based on global citizenship overnight'. However, his point is that the vision of creating engaged citizenship as a core value within universities is a scenario worth imagining. His sentiments echo with Phipps's evocative inducement to become better at imagining the 'kinds of futures which may be worth creating'. Alison Phipps shares with him a sense of hope that universities can create engaged citizens, but she warns us that there are no easy routes to this goal. As she suggests, both critical thinking, and now the newer focus on 'creative' thinking can, if we are not careful, become devoid of meaning and associated action. She enjoins us to keep alive a language that has meaning to us.

Phipps's plea for us to lament a lack of 'air' in contemporary universities points to the 'bureaucratic control, and suffocation, the urgency of email, forms in place of form, diarized days which daze, endless assessments, reviews which signal the end of trust . . .' Her passion for bringing life back into higher education is reflected also in the powerful piece by Kathleen Lynch, on the 'care-less' culture of universities. Here Lynch argues that the bureaucratic control of universities demands an efficient and compliant workforce; in effect a workforce without responsibilities of care for others. She suggests that in the system of 'individualized academic capitalism' of modern universities is the requirement that we are unencumbered by duties of care: 'caring in one's personal life is not valued, and top-level positions within higher education are substantively if not formally defined as care-less positions.'

Lynch is not lamenting the loss of a more humane university: indeed, she argues that universities have not developed a tradition of valuing care amongst humanity. This criticism is quite profound, but in her passion for showing us how this carelessness is embedded in academic practice she enables us to imagine a future worth creating.

Indeed, she is making the case again for a type of citizenship to be cultivated in universities, but from the perspective that engaged citizens have to care for one another.

In this brief introduction, I have attended to the similarities between the authors in their criticisms of and their hopes for the contemporary university. However, I hope readers will enjoy the points of tension between the authors as well. One of the factors which encouraged us to invite certain speakers was the anticipated debates when they sparked off each other, coming as they do from different perspectives and with different concerns. We were not disappointed.

The Galway Symposium is an annual fixture within the CELT calendar. We held another Symposium in June 2009 on curriculum and assessment in higher education. In 2010 the topic will be creativity in higher education. For those of you who were not able to join us in this beautiful setting on the west coast of Ireland, you can watch videos of some of the keynote presentations from both years at http://www.nuigalway.ie/celt/teaching_and_learning/webcasts.html. If you would like to join us at the next event, we extend to you a warm welcome.

References

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