

# Transforming University Teaching

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# Overview of argument

- Public debates over the value of an undergraduate education has been dominated by oversimplified accounts of the educational process.
- This has made us lose sight of the educational arguments for an undergraduate education.
- This has distorted our understanding of what a high quality undergraduate education looks like;
- We need to re-focus our attention on the educational purposes of undergraduate higher education and understand the transformational nature of an undergraduate education (Watson 2014).

# Underpinning research

This argument brings together four strands of joint work:

**A previous ESRC funded project:**

*Pedagogic Quality and Inequality Project* (see McLean et al 2018).

**A book on teaching in higher education**

*Reflective Teaching in Higher Education* (Ashwin et al 2015).

**And two CGHE projects:**

Project 1.6: *Pathways to Personal and Public Good: understanding access to, student experiences of, and outcomes from South African undergraduate higher education* (see Ashwin and Case 2018)

Project 3.3: *Understanding Knowledge and Student Agency (UKSA) Project*

# Emerging question from across the projects

How do we develop a vision of an inclusive, transformational higher education system rather than a elitist, reproductive one?

# The generic skills version of undergraduate education

- The key purpose of higher education is to provide the next generation of professionals;
- This can best be approached by enabling students to develop the generic competencies that employers and society value;
- This will lead to both individual prosperity and economic development.

(for example see Jackson 2014)

# Problems with the generic skills view

- Presents a simplified and distorted vision of the educational purposes of higher education;
- It is not clear that higher education is the best way of developing such generic skills (Wolf 2002; Caplan 2018);
- There is limited evidence that undergraduate higher education develops skills in this way (Arum and Roksa 2011).

# The signalling view

- Undergraduate education's major role is to signal to employers that graduates are worth employing (Wolf 2002; Caplan 2018);
- As more people attend university, competition for graduate jobs increases without any increase in quality;
- Strongly linked to the obsession with global rankings and institutional prestige.

# How the signalling view destroys a commitment to education

First: the humanist case for education subsidies is flimsy today because the Internet makes enlightenment practically free. Second: the humanist case for education subsidies was flimsy all along because the Internet proves low consumption of ideas and culture stems from apathy, not poverty or inconvenience

(Caplan 2018, p.242)



# Why does this oversimplification matter?

- These simplified accounts of the educational process distort how we understand the definition and measurement of quality
- They imply that we can measure the quality of education by the labour market outcomes of graduates, despite clear evidence that these are structured by institutional prestige and the background of the students (Blasko 2002, Lessard-Phillips et al. 2018; Friedman & Laurison 2019)
- In this way, a focus on labour market outcomes reinforces the dominance of elite higher education and, because access to these institutions is stratified (Boliver 2015), reinforces the reproductive role of higher education.
- Graduate premiums are more a reflection of the level of inequality in a society than the quality of undergraduate education.

# An educational response to the generic skills view

- Just because we can describe a practice in terms of generic competencies, it does not mean that this is what actually at stake in this practice;
- We can describe the same practice in terms of as many generic competencies as we have the imagination to generate;
- Skilful practices are based on our knowledge, our understandings of particular tasks, our interactions with other people and things, and the setting we are in.

*There is no destination with this discipline... There is always something further and there is no point where you can stop and say 'I understood, I am a sociologist'. ... The thing is sociology makes you aware of every decision you make: how that would impact on my life and how it could impact on someone else. And it makes the decision harder to make (Esther, Selective, Year 3, Pedagogic Quality and Inequality Project).*

# *Pedagogic Quality and Inequality Project*

In a survey of over 700 sociology students from 4 universities, we found that:

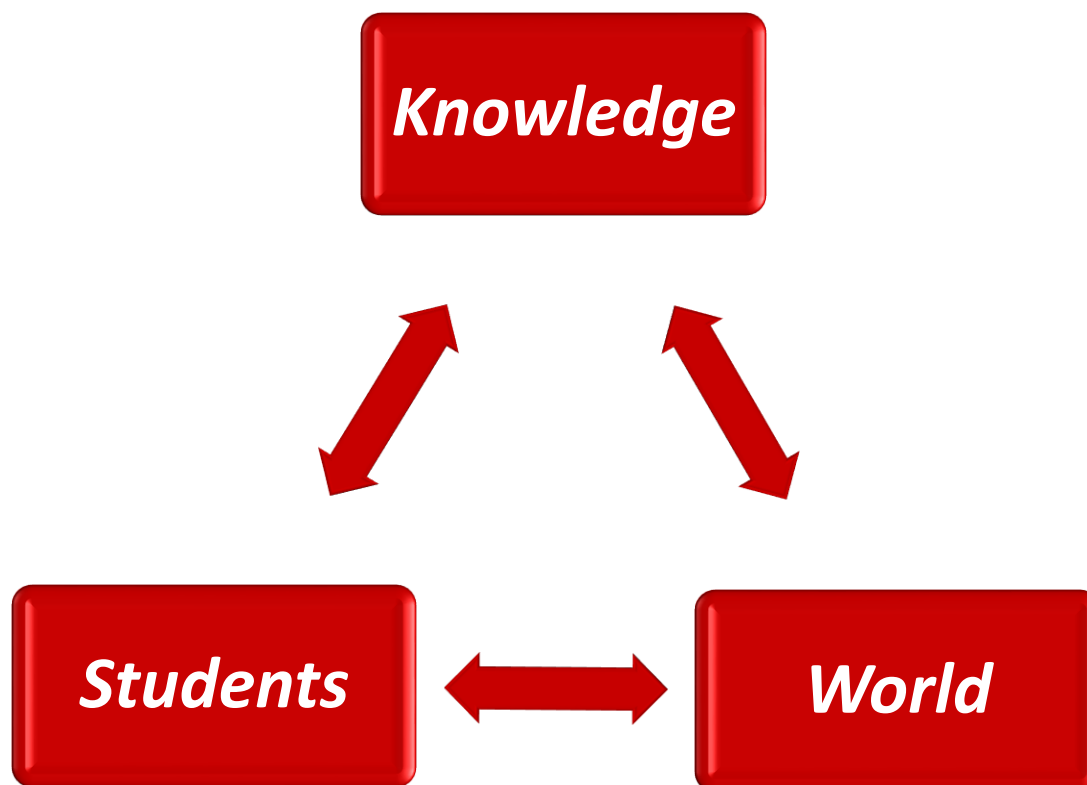
- The more students engaged with sociological knowledge, the greater their development of social confidence, their intention to change themselves and society; their development of academic and employability skills; and their satisfaction with their course.
- The level of engagement of academic knowledge cut across traditional hierarchies of institutional prestige (Ashwin et al. 2012).

<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Studies</b>	<b>Least inclusive Account</b>	<b>‘Watershed’ account</b>	<b>Most Inclusive account</b>
Mathematics	Wood et al. 2012	Numbers	Models	Approach to life
Accountancy	Sin et al. 2012	Routine work	Meaningful work	Moral work
Law	Reid et al. 2006	Content	System	Extension of self
Music	Reid 2001	Instrument	Meaning	Communicating
Geography	Bradbeer et al. 2004	General world	Structured into parts	Interactions
Geoscience	Stokes 2011	Composition of earth	Interacting systems	Relations earth and society

I'll observe something, which to somebody who doesn't do Chemistry, they'll just see it for what it is. But then, in my mind I just start thinking about the theory behind why that's working... sometimes the science element kind of goes off in my brain, and I start analysing things in that kind of way, other than just seeing things for what it is... I feel like, in science, that's the way that we move forward. Because, I mean, science, it's great to know, but it's not purely for the benefit of knowledge. We want knowledge, but then we want to see how we can use that knowledge, and how we can apply it, and improve things.

(Chemistry Student, Year 2, UKSA Project)

# The transformative power of higher education for students



# A student and knowledge focused higher education

- Teaching in higher education is about designing ways in which particular students can develop an understanding of particular bodies of disciplinary and/or professional knowledge (Ashwin et al. 2015 based on Shulman 1986).
- The transformational nature of undergraduate degrees lies in changes in students' sense of self through their engagement with disciplinary and professional knowledge;
- Students relating their identities to their disciplines/professions and the world and seeing themselves implicated in knowledge;
- This does not always happen – it requires students to be intellectually engaged with their courses and to see it as an educational experience. This is dependent on both students and the quality of their educational experience (Ashwin et al 2016)



# What does Transforming University Teaching look like

Well designed degree programmes that are based on evidence-informed views of:

- who the students are;
- how and why the knowledge, which students are offered access to, is important and powerful; how it enables them to understand and change the world;
- who students will become through their engagement with this knowledge; how they will contribute to society including, but not limited to, their employment;

This is difficult, collective, intellectual work, which involves on-going dialogue and experimentation (Ashwin et al 2015).

# So what?

- We need to develop stronger educational arguments for the power of undergraduate education that offer clearer accounts of why the knowledge is powerful and who it will enable students to become in the future;
- Universities need to commit to finding ways of making this powerful knowledge accessible to all of students, so that we have an inclusive transformative higher education system.
- This is challenging and difficult work that will involve a renewed focus on educational priorities.
- If we don't commit to this then we will be left at the mercy oversimplified accounts of the value of higher education that will impoverish the meaning of an undergraduate education and reinforce a reproductive, elitist higher education system.

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