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# Transforming university teaching

**Paul Ashwin**

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# Transforming university teaching

(2019 CGHE conference keynote transcript\*)

Paul Ashwin

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**Paul Ashwin** is a Co-Investigator on CGHE's global higher education engagement research programme and leads CGHE's local higher education engagement research programme.

## Abstract

There are fierce debates about the purpose and quality of university teaching in the UK and internationally. This keynote examines the two senses of transforming university teaching: how university teaching can be transformational for students and how we might need to transform it for this to happen. Paul Ashwin argues that we are currently reliant on oversimplified accounts of the educational process provided by universities, which do not provide a supportive context for either of these senses of transformation to be realised. Drawing on a range of evidence, including from CGHE projects, he sets out an alternative vision for university teaching that is centred on the ways in which students are transformed by their engagement with disciplinary and professional knowledge.

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\* This is a transcript of the keynote that Professor Ashwin planned to give at the fourth annual conference of the Centre for Global Higher Education at the UCL Institute of Education in London on 3 April 2019.

## Lecture transcript

We hear a lot about crisis in higher education: crises of funding, crises of access, the student debt crises but these crises are not very often linked to the education that is offered by universities. When they are, it tends to be about universities failing to produce employable graduates or students failing to develop generic skills<sup>1</sup>. My central argument in this presentation is that this is because public debates over the value of an undergraduate education have been dominated by oversimplified accounts of their educational purposes. This has distorted our understanding of what a high-quality undergraduate education looks like. I argue that we need to re-focus our attention on the educational purposes of undergraduate higher education. This involves developing a clearer understanding of the transformational nature of an undergraduate education.

My argument is underpinned by a series of joint research projects including a three-year study of students' experiences of studying sociology<sup>2</sup>, a book co-authored with leading international experts on reflective teaching in higher education<sup>3</sup>, as well as two projects based in the Centre for Global Higher Education. The first examined how South African undergraduate education contributes to the personal and public good<sup>4</sup> and the second is examining students' experiences of studying Chemistry and Chemical Engineering degrees in the UK, South Africa and the United States. The overall question that brings together these projects is: How do we develop a vision of an inclusive, transformational higher education system rather than an elitist, reproductive one? This question is motivated by the ways in which elite higher education continues to be positioned and normalised as the ideal form of higher education<sup>5</sup>, even though its attractiveness is built on excluding far more people than it educates.

The most dominant simplified account of the purposes of undergraduate education is the argument that the key purpose of higher education is to provide students with the generic skills that employers value, which will support individual prosperity and economic development<sup>6</sup>. As well as oversimplifying and distorting the educational purposes of higher education, this account brings with it two further problems. First of all it is not at all clear that universities are the best institutions to support students in developing such skills<sup>7</sup>. Second, the evidence suggests that higher education is not particularly effective at developing such skills<sup>8</sup>.

In response to the limitations of this account, some argue that the major role of undergraduate degrees is to signal to employers that graduates are worth employing<sup>9</sup>. Under this view, mass higher education is seen as a waste of resources because it simply leads to previously non-graduate jobs being defined as graduate jobs without any increase in quality or productivity. This view of the purposes of undergraduate education ends up undermining a commitment to the government funded higher education as argued in a recent book by Bryan Caplan:

*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<sup>10</sup>.*

In Caplan's argument that all knowledge can be meaningfully accessed from the Internet and people's failure to do so shows that they are simply not interested in gaining access to this knowledge, we again see an oversimplified account of the educational experiences offered by universities. It is worth noting that the quality of the education offered is simply not an issue under the signalling perspective because the educational process is irrelevant to its argument.

However, the quality of education offered by universities is highly relevant to students and policymakers. The simplified accounts of the educational process offered by generic skills and the signalling view distort how we understand the definition and measurement of quality. They both imply that we can measure the quality of education by the labour market outcomes of graduates. This is despite clear evidence that these are structured by institutional prestige and the background of the students<sup>11</sup>, neither of which tell us anything about educational quality. In this way, a focus on labour market outcomes reinforces the dominance of elite higher education and, because access to these institutions is stratified<sup>12</sup>, reinforces the reproductive role of higher education. It is also worth noting that graduate premiums, the differences between graduate and non-graduate salaries, are more a reflection of the level of inequality in a society than the quality of undergraduate education. Societies with the greatest levels of inequality have the highest graduate premiums.

So how might an educational account of the purpose of undergraduate education be developed? We can start by examining the limitations of the generic skills account of undergraduate education. Whilst, at first, seeing the purpose of undergraduate education in terms of the development of generic skills might look convincing, it falls apart when we examine what this means in relation to specific skills. For example, if we take communication skills, then we can look at communication in different situations and in different locations, and identify incidents of effective practice. However, it does not follow that if a student is good at communicating in English, then they will also be good at communicating in Chinese. The same is true of problem solving. If a student can solve a problem in chemistry, it does not mean that they can solve a sociological problem. This is because skilful acts of communication or problem solving require knowledge about the subject matter that is the focus of the act; knowledge of the situation the student is in, and knowledge of the people with whom the student is acting. Without such knowledge, these skills are useless. This highlights the central role that knowledge plays in shaping the meaning of what students have gained from their university experiences.

Take for example the following quote from a student from sociology study I mentioned earlier:

*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.*

This quotation highlights how the student's engagement with knowledge has changed her view of the world and her role in it. As part of this project, in a survey of over 700 sociology students from four universities, we found that the more students engaged with sociological knowledge the more they gained in social confidence and the more they wanted to change themselves and society. Interestingly, we also found that the more they engaged with this knowledge, the more they felt they had developed both academic and employability skills. This relationship highlights the ways in which these skills are embedded in the knowledge of the discipline rather than being meaningfully generic. Contrary to discourses of students as consumers, we also found that the more students engaged with knowledge, the more they were satisfied with their course.

A response to these findings has been that this is what one might expect in sociology degrees but that is because it is 'sociology'. However, these changes happen in other subjects too. The table below shows studies from a range of disciplines that examined how university students' understanding of knowledge change over time. The changes fall into three main stages. A basic account focuses only on the immediately visible aspects of the discipline, a middle 'watershed' account in which students begin to focus on personal meaning and a most inclusive account in which they go beyond personal meaning to see the discipline within a wider context. These changes give an insight into how engaging with knowledge at university changes students' understanding of their disciplines, the world and themselves. This is a process that is so much more than the development of generic skills or the gaining of information that can be found on the internet. It is a process that fundamentally changes who students are and what they can achieve in the world.

Discipline	Studies	Least inclusive Account	'Watershed' Account	Most Inclusive Account
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

We are also seeing something similar in our project where we are studying students' experiences of studying undergraduate degrees in Chemistry and Chemical Engineering. For example, here is how a second year Chemistry student describes how Chemistry impacts on his view of the world, which again includes a commitment to change things:

*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.*

These studies of students' engagement with academic knowledge, provide an insight into the transformative power of an undergraduate degree. However, it does not suggest that universities can just argue that what they currently offer is good enough to provide such transformation. Rather, it suggests that we need to develop undergraduate degrees that focus on both who the students are and the knowledge with which they are engaging. This approach positions teaching in higher education as about designing ways in which particular students can develop an understanding of particular bodies of disciplinary and/or professional knowledge<sup>13</sup>. This approach highlights that the transformational potential of undergraduate degrees lies in

changes in students' sense of self through their engagement with disciplinary and professional knowledge. This involves students relating their identities to their disciplines/professions and the world and seeing themselves implicated in knowledge. It is important to be clear that 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<sup>14</sup>.

This finally brings us to the title of this presentation: 'Transforming University Teaching'. This way of offering an educational justification for the power of an undergraduate education suggests that we need to design curricula that are focused on providing students with access to knowledge that will transform their sense of who they are and what they can do in the world. To do this we need to have a clear sense of who our students are, how the knowledge we will give them access to is powerful, and who it will enable them to become in the wider lives as well as in their careers. It is clear that students might change in ways that their university teachers do not expect but their teachers should have a sense of what they are intending to achieve by giving students access to this knowledge. In other words, they have a responsibility as educators to know how they think students will benefit by studying with them. It is also important to be clear that this is demanding work – it does not always work – and teachers need to continually collect, analyse and discuss evidence with their colleagues about how well their approaches to curriculum design and teaching are working.

If we understand the educational role of undergraduate degrees in this way, then this will have an impact on how we measure the quality of these degrees. Rather than graduate labour market outcomes, we would focus on how degree programmes are designed to give students access to powerful knowledge, the extent to which they are successful to providing students access to this knowledge, and what students gain from their engagement with this knowledge. It is worth noting that this is far more educationally demanding of degree programmes and universities than measuring labour market outcomes. It would also provide students with much more useful information about the quality of education offered by different degree programmes.

In conclusion, my argument is that 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 their students, so that we work towards building an inclusive transformative higher education system. This is challenging and difficult work that will involve a renewed focus on educational priorities. However, if we don't commit to this then we will be left at the mercy of oversimplified accounts of the purposes of an undergraduate education that reinforce a reproductive, elitist higher education system.



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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Arum and Roxa 2011.

<sup>2</sup> See McLean et al 2018.

<sup>3</sup> See Ashwin et al 2015.

<sup>4</sup> See Ashwin and Case 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Cantwell et al. 2018

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Jackson 2014.

<sup>7</sup> For examples of this argument, see Wolf 2002 and Caplan 2018

<sup>8</sup> Arum and Roxa 2011

<sup>9</sup> Wolf 2002 and Caplan 2018

<sup>10</sup> Caplan 2018, p.242

<sup>11</sup> Blasko 2002, Lessard-Phillips et al. 2018; Friedman & Laurison 2019

<sup>12</sup> Boliver 2015

<sup>13</sup> Ashwin et al. 2015 based on Shulman 1986

<sup>14</sup> Ashwin et al 2016