

WHAT MIGHT A 'COMPLETE EDUCATION' MEAN?

This paper was produced by David Dickenson as an appendix to an early draft of the Student Experience Strategy (August 2007). It reveals some of the thinking that underlies the educational aspirations for the strategy. At this time the core concept was 'Transformative Education' but this had to be modified in response to concerns about the appropriation of the educational process by interests that were other than academic. Nevertheless, in working towards an understanding of what a complete education might mean it is worth reconsidering these ideas.

Why Transformative Education?

Some of the ideas which underpin the draft Student Experience Strategy stem from the work of academic and practitioner educationalists in the USA. These are articulated most fully in *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience* (NASPA, 2004¹) and in *Greater Expectations: A new vision for learning as a nation goes to college* (AAC&U, 2002²).

Together, these argue for the **"integrated use of all of higher education's resources in the education and preparation of the whole student"**. They define learning as a **"comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development**, processes that have often been considered separate, and even independent of each other." (NASPA, p4). The authors imply that learning is not solely or even primarily academic instruction. They recognise the essential integration of personal development with learning: "A successful educational experience simultaneously increases cognitive understanding and a sense of personal maturity and interpersonal effectiveness" (NASPA, p3)

Within this paradigm, learning is a rich and complicated endeavour; it entails explicit connection and integration of academic learning with wider student support and development. "Our society expects ... universities to graduate students who can get things done in the world and are prepared for effective and engaged citizenship ... **To support today's learning outcomes, the focus of education must shift from information transfer to identity development (transformation)**" (p2, 9).

Today's real world of work requires that graduates excel at, inter alia:

- communicating in diverse settings;
- understanding and employing both quantitative and qualitative analysis;
- interpreting, evaluating and using information discerningly;
- integrating knowledge of various types;
- understanding complex systems [*and situations*];
- resolving difficult issues creatively;
- deriving meaning [*and learning*] from experience;
- transforming information into knowledge, and that knowledge into judgement and action [*wisdom!*];
- demonstrating intellectual agility and managing change;
- working well in teams
- *knowing how to work and communicate with people from different cultures.*
- *and many more complex achievements.*

[Italicised text added by nj. There is something here about thinking and acting with a level of complexity that is appropriate for any given situation].

¹ the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators: http://www.naspa.org/membership/leader_ex_pdf/lr_long.pdf

² the Association of American Colleges and Universities: <http://www.greaterexpectations.org/>

The authors argue that the key to this is **developing students as intentional learners: “Intentional learners are integrated thinkers who can see connections in seemingly disparate information and draw on a wide range of knowledge to make decisions. They adapt to the skills learned in one situation to problems encountered in another”** (AAC&U, p21).

Historically, Universities have tended to compartmentalise, seeing students as their component parts (body, mind, spirit), rather than as an integrated whole, and this has supported the emergence of fragmented university systems and structures – academic disciplines to cultivate the intellect, and student care to tend the body, emotions, and spirit. A transformative paradigm requires **considering the University as “an integrated system for learning” and breaking down the divisions between student learning and student support/development. As the NASPA authors put it: “It is quite realistic to consider the entire campus as a learning community in which student learning experiences can be mapped throughout the environment to deepen the quality of learning.”** (p13)

In practice, this would mean that the approach to delivering pastoral support and personal tutoring, volunteering, advisory and counselling services, student societies and clubs, social and learning facilities, formal teaching, staff development, to name but a few, are informed and integrated by the concept of holistic and transformative education (after Billingham, 2007).

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Evaluation

Are the ideas expressed in David’s paper educationally soundly based or problematic? If the latter why?/how are they problematic?

Using the ideas in the paper can we begin to develop propositions about the nature of a complete education

- What are the pros and cons of thinking about learning and our own campus environment as a resource for learning in the ways represented in the paper?
- Does a complete education embrace the development of an individual academically, personally (identity and personal agency), professionally, socially and culturally (is anything important missing from this list?).
- Does a complete education involve learning in, and integrating learning from, many different contexts?
- Is the idea of a university as “an *integrated system for learning*” useful in helping us visualise the sorts of organisational and conceptual changes necessary to adapt/innovate around the idea of a complete education?
- What are the consequences of the above for the way we present, promote, support, recognise and value learning?