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Beyond Phronesis: the possibilities of the ontogenic curriculum (0242)

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The generic skills agenda within Australian was born out of the problem that graduates were not fully equipped for professional practice. Moving beyond and drawing on the findings of an Australian evaluation project on Graduate Attributes (The National GAP project), this paper will contextualise the generic skills debate historically and provide a new perspective on the problem by drawing on the notions of episteme, techné and phronesis. We suggest phronesis as too pragmatic to be useful for the problems that will need to be addressed by graduates in the 21st century. We argue for an interpretation of phronesis that shifts the emphasis from pragmatic wisdom to a broader ethical framework. We explore the possibilities and conditions of an ontogenic curriculum, provide examples and consider the implications for curriculum design. We discuss a consequentialist framework that might provide a suitable framing for higher education curricula into the future.

Beyond Phronesis: the possibilities of the ontogenic curriculum

Outline

In Australia, as elsewhere, there are calls from time to time to review the contribution higher education makes to society and to individuals. Over the past twenty or so years there have been regular critiques of the outcomes of higher education curricula, specifically and typically that HE does not produce graduates who are ready to practice their disciplines or professions – they come out with "book-learning" but cannot do the job effectively because the lack the full set of skills that would make them 'holistic' beginning professionals. The skills they are said to lack, the so-called "soft" or "generic" skills (e.g. collaboration, negotiation, communication, critical reasoning, ethical sensitivity), were suddenly thrown into relief and the graduate attributes agenda born in the early 1990s in Australia (Barrie, Hughes, Smith, 2009). What caused this?

Until the early 1980s, curricula in many disciplines were more 'holistic' taking students in year-cohorts through an integrated curriculum covering all aspects of professional practice. Around 1984, for example in engineering, the curriculum changed to a modular format. This was compatible with the emerging concentrations of research-based knowledge in specific sub-fields. Degrees were constituted according to bureaucratic rules – get the right mix of elementary courses and advanced courses, focus in on one or two major strands, take a limited number of courses outside the discipline for breadth of development and *voila*, a qualified such-and-such is created. This creates the problem. As knowledge concentration intensifies the curriculum is less integrated, less holistic; and the generic skills evaporated as though overnight.

But disciplinary or professional practice is a blend of contextualised knowledge and skills – enacted in a disciplinary frame and practice context, and it was within only a decade that there were calls for the soft skills to be returned to curriculum. But after 20 years of trying to reintegrate them, the success is

at best patchy (Barrie, Smith, Hughes 2009). Why is this so? To understand the problem we have to look closely at what was disintegrated in the move to the modular curriculum.

Su's (2008) work on assessing graduate attributes is useful in that it focuses on the claim that graduate attributes do not arise from the decontextualized acquisition of knowledge (*episteme*) and skills (*techne*) but rather that they are grounded in the immersed application of knowledge and skills using what is sometimes translated as "practical wisdom" (*phronesis*). This engagement looks at the sheer totality of a person's thinking, acting and being (Su, 2008). Along with Dall'Alba & Barnacle (2007) this approach contributes to an ontological 'turn' in the thinking about this problem. The focus shifts in this turn from what students know and can do, to something about their identity and being.

But *phronesis* is an ambiguous word. It can be read as *practical* wisdom, which emphasises the social skills and political savvy needed for ordinary effective functioning as a professional, above and beyond knowledge and skills. We note however that one can shift emphasis so it becomes practical *wisdom*; an emphasis on the ethical dimension underpinning action. This is where we want to develop our ideas for an ontogenic curriculum.

In Su's (2008) work *phronesis* is interpreted, correctly, as *practical wisdom*, i.e. application of knowledge and skills, embedded in a practice context. We find this interpretation limiting in the following way: it reproduces a focus on the performative aspects (Barnett, 2009) and occludes the ethical dimension of practical *wisdom* that guides or conditions decisions made by people. If the ontological turn (Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2007) is to have merit it must do more than re-label (as a focus on *being*) what is already a limiting focus within curriculum design – an emphasis on the ability to *do*. *Phronesis* needs to be more than a new label for professional and socio-political savvy.

The promise of the ontological turn is seductive; but can this ambitious promise be made into a plausible basis for curriculum design? That is, what are the preconditions for a truly ontogenic curriculum? We argue that these include: a focus on 'being' that: (1) goes beyond integration and embedding/holistic 'doing' (2) that incorporates a notion of what types of persons Higher Education ought to be aiming towards producing as citizens for the 21st century (3) that anticipates the types of problem that the 21st century citizens will be faced with – i.e. the supercomplexity of this world (Barnett, 2000) and finally (4) that equips graduates for living in and transforming such circumstances.

To achieve such outcomes, the ontogenic curriculum will need to focus on ethical decision-making abilities and approaches. Note, we do not mean by this any particular commitment to particular values (e.g. those derived from religious or cultural sources) but rather on the ability to think through the consequences of action. A consequentialist framework would seem to provide the greatest leverage to achieve the ontological and holistic outcomes described in this paper. But such a curriculum would need to conceive consequences very broadly, situating a person's actions in a civic, cultural and environmental context, not just in the professional domain.

How might an ontogenic curriculum operate? An ontogenic curriculum ideally will still achieve outcomes that integrate knowledge, skills and practical savvy. Beyond this however, it would focus students' attention on the consequences of their actions as both human beings and as practitioners of particular disciplines, professions etc.. It would take the students to a point, commonly espoused if less commonly achieved, of understanding the ethics of their profession's practices – how the

profession impacts on people, how it is situated and functions within the socio-legal and cultural context in which it operates, and of course, what are the prevailing ethical practice standards that apply to it. But it would also take the students' thinking beyond these considerations, making connections between the systems that interact with the particular profession being learnt. Examples from a range of disciplines will be discussed and these will be interpreted against the backdrop of the findings of the National Graduate Attributes Project (Barrie, Hughes, Smith 2009).

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