

The Creation of Equals

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Karl Jaspers argued that academics must be prepared to accept, perhaps even to welcome, the fact that most students “will learn next to nothing” from a university education. In this paper I shall argue that, while Jaspers’ model is unpersuasive as an ideal and inaccurate as a description, there is a truth lurking behind his forthright but gloomy conclusion; viz., that university teaching pays little direct attention to the needs of the student in the wider world (i.e. to the needs of the student qua employee or qua citizen or even qua rounded human being) and pays even less attention, or perhaps none at all, to the needs and expectations of third parties such as employers. In terms of the political context universities now find themselves in, this is an uncomfortable and embarrassing truth for faculty to admit, for it appears to epitomise a self-regarding and inward looking academy. Yet, despite this, perhaps it is a truth that academics should be prepared to accept, even to welcome. At least, in starting any serious discussion on the nature of a university education, it should be a truth we are prepared to admit.

A TRUTH THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME

In *The Idea of the University* Karl Jaspers argued that we must be prepared to accept, perhaps even to welcome, the fact that most students “will learn next to nothing” from a university education (1959, p.60). Here Jaspers seems to give voice to the sort of exclusionary elitism that so horrifies the current British political establishment and prompts periodic outbursts from its senior members in Sunday newspapers.¹ Jaspers’ bracing defence of academic elitism stems from his conception of the university’s mission; in particular, from what he maintains are its exacting educational aims and the peculiar nature of the student/faculty relationship. Curiously, this rather shocking outcome emerges from an inclusive sounding philosophy. “University education,” he argues, “is a formative process aiming at a meaningful freedom,” and since, “learning and personal initiative go hand in hand, the university aims for the broadest possible development of independence and personal responsibility” (ibid., p.52). In line with this, a university education is the product of a discussion between participants with a “Socratic equality of status.” The stress is thus on a mutual respect for intellectual standards and the truth; not on hierarchy, nor authority, nor anything that smacks of schooling.

While liberating and empowering (perhaps), the up-shot is that the student “is free to ‘go to the dogs’” (ibid., p.54). Students are thrown back on their own resources with minimal

¹ In Britain university teachers have become inured to the curious spectacle of high-ranking members of the British establishment accusing them of elitism. Needless to say, the irony of this is entirely lost on the perpetrators.

supervision of studies and nothing in the way of curricula and syllabi to strait-jacket and stifle the life of the mind. They are also free to determine the degree to which they participate in classes or depend on books alone and must be relied upon to find their own way through the inevitable difficulties, perplexities and mistakes encountered in learning, and so necessary for their intellectual growth. Nevertheless, Jaspers recognises that such freedom is fraught with danger for the student. “The grain of sand remains free and independent next to the cliff” he dryly observes (*ibid.*).

This is not, it would seem, a vision of higher education compatible with the mechanisms and values of the modern university. Being free to go to the dogs does not sit easily with specified learning outcomes, attendance requirements, retention rates, or quality assurance and enhancement procedures. It is a vision that views with abhorrence any form of regulation and the policing of either student or faculty. There is even a sharp tension with pedagogic aids such as reading lists, handouts, distributed lecture notes, or anything else that might be regarded as the apparatus of spoon-feeding. Indeed, it hardly seems to promote anything that could be regarded as teaching at all. And his claim that most students—“the mediocre majority”—learn next to nothing and that university teachers should welcome this fact appears distinctly at odds with fashionable notions such as relevance or employability and does not obviously harmonize with other contemporary concerns such as widening participation or student-centredness.

In fact, while most of the foregoing incompatibilities are certainly true—his vision is undoubtedly in conflict with the values of the modern university—the last two are less so. Jaspers was not a social elitist and he thought that anyone who was adequately prepared should be allowed access to higher learning; the only admissions criterion for him being whether the prospective student has “sufficient mental equipment to do the work” (*ibid.*, p.59). “In effect,” he continues, “the people who attend the university are an average group of people who have been able to acquire the necessary preparation.” In addition to this (albeit somewhat naïve) access liberalism, his whole approach could be seen as the logical outcome, or conceivably the *reductio ad absurdum*, of a student-centred education or the equally fashionable, but ideologically loaded, discourse of ‘learning opportunities’. His position is not, therefore, straightforwardly elitist in a way to frighten the horses.

What is the relevance of his vision for us? It is certainly not my aim here to endorse or defend Jaspers’ model of a university education; neither its ostensibly Devil-take-the-hindmost ethos nor its University of Summerhill approach to student freedom.² Despite the fact that it contains many useful insights and clearly has elements that would be applauded by many jobbing academics disillusioned with the constraints and general vulgarity of the modern university, his overall conception strikes me as unpersuasive as an ideal and simply inaccurate as a description. Nevertheless, what I shall say will bring little comfort to modernisers in government or elsewhere and may well confirm their deepest fears about academics and ivory towers. It is true that there is no university that conforms to Jaspers’ model, nor has there ever been. It is also true that, in particular, his

² Though, in its favour, it does present an important defence of the student’s freedom to fail, something that is anathema in the modern university.

understanding of the context and general character of the student/faculty relationship is hopelessly ideal and, in my view, pedagogically mistaken. Yet saying why this is so reveals something fundamental about this relationship and the aims of a university education, at least from the point of view of those engaged in it. If Jaspers is mostly wrong, he is revealingly wrong.

The point of view of practitioners is something largely absent from the current public debate on the nature and role of universities.³ What both Jaspers and the apologists of the modern university appear grossly to underestimate is the importance of the academic subject discipline in shaping the intellectual lives of many university teachers and their students and in determining the nature of the pedagogic relationship. Yet the academic subject discipline, or combination of disciplines, is commonly the single most important influence on what is taught and how it is learnt. This may seem an obvious truism to anyone who is part of the peculiar community, or set of communities, that forms a university; but its acceptance is not uncontroversial, and perhaps rightly so.

This is because it requires us to acknowledge two further realities. It follows, or so I shall argue, that there is a controversial truth and its apparent corollary lurking behind Jaspers' forthright but gloomy conclusion. The controversial truth is that that university teaching has, and perhaps has to have, a rather narrow focus. The fact is that this teaching pays little direct attention to the needs of the student in the wider world (i.e. to the needs of the student *qua* employee or *qua* citizen or even *qua* rounded human being) and pays even less attention, or perhaps none at all, to the needs and expectations of third parties such as employers or other outside 'stakeholders'. And linked to this is the apparent corollary that, in a sense, this teaching is aimed at a exceedingly small number of elite students; viz., those who continue in their subject disciplines after graduation.

In terms of the political context universities now find themselves in, these are uncomfortable and embarrassing things for faculty to admit for they appear to epitomise a self-regarding and inward looking academy. In fact, the controversial truth is one has become a truth that dare not speak its name; something to be spoken *sotto voce* and shared only amongst consenting academics in private. And yet it nonetheless underpins a form of relationship between the academy and *all* its students, including the so-called mediocre majority and not just the elite few. It is a form of relationship that most of us working in universities value. I shall argue that this seemingly elitist and exclusionary reality in fact positively shapes this relationship in a way that is beneficial and, perhaps counter-intuitively, inclusive. It may even provide the basis for a genuinely empowering educational experience.

So, despite being uncomfortable, perhaps *this* is a truth that academics should be prepared to accept, even to welcome. At least, in starting any serious discussion on the nature of a university education, it should be a truth we are prepared to admit.

³ For example, in a recent round table discussion on higher education and skills hosted by the *New Statesman* magazine (11 May 2007) only one of the fifteen participants came anywhere close to being involved in university teaching.

REPLACEMENTS, NOT REPLICAS

I wish to begin with a brief personal reminiscence. In a staff development seminar a number of years ago a senior academic and manager at my own institution (now retired) made a remark that struck me as so fundamentally wrongheaded that I immediately wrote it down verbatim. “We are not in the business of making replicas of ourselves.” In fact, he was right in terms of the letter of his statement, but not in its spirit or intent. He was right in that we are not in the business of making simple facsimilies of ourselves; but was importantly wrong in that we are in the business of making *replacements*. “The student is the scholar and scientist-to-be” Jaspers rightly observes (*ibid.*, p.54). Indeed, I now think that (with an important qualification) the process of ensuring replacements is central to university teaching in an academic subject discipline. Of course, this is not to say that the making of replacements is its *only* function; but I am led one to wonder whether this is its only justifiable aim.

My ex-colleague’s dictum was equally targeted at this sort of position. His point was that a university education should not be about producing philosophers, historians or mathematicians but in teaching the skills necessary for successful lives outside academe. This complaint is not particularly new, of course. The contention has been that a university education should have an all-purpose utility, achieved by teaching general skills such as ‘creative imagination’ or ‘logical thinking’ rather than the specific skills associated with practice of the subject disciplines. More recently the grievance has narrowed so that, where once complainants may have spoken of ‘skills for life’, utility is now seen almost exclusively in terms of economic value. ‘Successful lives outside academe’ increasingly means simply economically productive lives.

It is now a familiar and recurring theme in the public debate on the role of higher education and has received added impetus in the UK context with publication of the Leitch Report into Britain’s long-term skills needs, with its call on universities to focus more directly on the needs of employers (Leitch 2006). The governing concepts of this theme are ‘relevance’, ‘employability’ and ‘competitiveness’. A university education must be relevant to the wider world and the needs of the graduate within it. More particularly, it must fulfil its role in wealth creation; both for the individual graduate, through preparation for gainful employment, and for society at large, by enhancing the country’s competitiveness. This narrow agenda now gives voice to an increasingly dominant view of the function of higher education that many within academe find is often scornful of traditional academic culture and values.

That these notions have become common currency is partly due to ministers who seem eager to pander to the frequently uneducated prejudices of a very vocal lobby, with whom they appear to share a narrow economic instrumentalism and technist value system. If we think this is an exaggeration, we need only to remind ourselves of the widely reported remark by Charles Clarke, one-time Minister of State for Education in the UK: “The universities have got to learn that their only job is to teach skills which are directly

relevant to the economy” (McCabe 2004).⁴ Although such sentiments are rarely given voice with such honest and disarming brutality, they are a feature of the public debate and are regularly expressed by business leaders in the UK. Thus Philip Green used his recent guest-editorship of BBC Radio 4’s *Today* to promulgate a similar view and Richard Branson, in an earlier incumbency of the same guest-editorship, bemoaned the fact that higher education curricula are designed by those “too close to the subject.”⁵ When John Denham, the current UK minister responsible for higher education, says “Our shared vision must surely be of a system where businesses are willing to pay for provision, because they can see a *direct connection* between what students are learning and increased productivity” (Denham 2008—my emphasis) there is a change only in tone rather than substance from Clarke’s abrasive instrumentalism.

Naturally, very few in higher education would agree with any of *this*—especially with the idea that the university’s *only* job is to teach skills directly relevant to the economy—though they may well agree, and often do agree, that what the university does needs to be somehow more relevant; that is, it is incumbent upon the university to be more accountable to the ‘outside world’ and more responsive to its needs. Indeed, Ronald Barnett has argued that it is only when academics respond to this challenge and have rethought their place in this wider world, will it be possible to “talk again of ‘the university’ without embarrassment” (2003, p.568).⁶

This embarrassment may thus manifest itself in ways other than just a desire to demonstrate economic utility. We may also want to appear responsive to our broader social and political contexts. Hence, the temptation succumbed to by many institutions of trying to define ‘graduateness’ in terms of personal attributes additional to the graduate’s academic profile; attributes such as ‘an appreciation of, and responsiveness, to change’ or ‘an appreciation of, and respect for, diversity’ or ‘an appreciation of, and commitment to, sustainability.’ Even if we agree that such attributes are socially desirable (assuming we first agree what on Earth they mean), are we sure it is the job of the university to ‘build windows into men’s souls’? Such an aspiration smacks of rudimentary social engineering and *is* an attempt to manufacture our moral and political replicas. Happily, it is a project that is almost certainly destined to fail. I say ‘happily’ for one hopes that it does fail (even if one approves of such qualities), given that such a project clashes with what we cherish as fundamental to the university’s traditional mission; i.e. its role as an

⁴ Clarke also became notorious for suggesting—or so it was reported—that subjects such as medieval history could continue to be taught at a small number of universities as an ‘ornamental adornment’.

⁵ Philip Green, *Today*, BBC Radio 4, 2 January 2007 and Richard Branson, *Today*, BBC Radio 4, 29 December 2004.

⁶ Lord Dearing obviously felt the discomfiture acutely, as there was barely a mention of ‘universities’ as such in his major, 1700-page report on the future of UK higher education in 1997 (Maskell & Robinson 2002, p.64). Chris Woodhead, the UK government’s acerbic former Chief Inspector of Schools, grumbles about the fact that “We do not even talk of universities any more. It is ‘higher education’ and ‘lifelong learning’, whatever the latter in practice might be” (2002, pp.138-139).

institution where such notions are subjected to interrogation—something to which I shall return.

Yet, despite a reasonable apprehension about such developments, is not my ex-colleague's concern an entirely legitimate one? After all, and apart from anything else, the simple truth staring all university teachers in the face is that most students just are not scholars and scientists in the making. Jaspers thought that the university teacher has no obligation to teach all her students, only the elite few (p.59); but can this be right? The idea of the student as a potential academic seemingly ignores the evident fact that the vast majority of students will, after only a brief repose, escape the narrow grooves of academe to live their lives in the wider world beyond—economically productive or otherwise. In which case, it is hardly unreasonable to suggest that the university has an obligation to serve the needs of this majority—mediocre or otherwise. And even if they do turn out to be scholars and scientists, we must not forget that scholars and scientists are themselves also employees, consumers and citizens.

The response to this justified point is three-fold. Firstly, it is not clear that university teachers, being practitioners of their respective academic subject disciplines, could or should take any other approach in their teaching—to do so would probably not be in the interests of either students or furthering their particular branch of knowledge. Secondly, it is also far from obvious that the needs of this majority are not served by treating them as scholars and scientists-to-be—a notion such as 'relevance' is irrelevant, given the wide applicability of the skills students do acquire. And thirdly, aiming to serve the needs of our students is importantly different to aiming to serve the needs of third parties outside the learning relationship—even if the needs of these two groups coincide, our primary obligation is to our students *within the academic context*.

There are dangers for the university in responding too hastily to the exhortations of those who think it should be more worldly in its orientation, especially if it also wishes to remain true to its academic goals. Of course, a complex organisation such as a university can and does have a number of social and economic functions it can perform in addition to its academic and educational role. Nonetheless, without wishing to prolong the apparent embarrassment, we might have to insist that for core academic areas within the university, being more worldly stands in tension with this academic and educational role. Among the many other things wrong with the Clarke-type vision is that it sees universities as merely institutions of higher education and not as institutions of higher learning. That is to say, the education that does take place within such an institution has typically done so within the context of a broader set of intellectual endeavours, which constitute the practice of our academic subject disciplines. This is not an incidental or contingent feature of that education for it receives its very character and coherence by standing in a close relationship to these other activities.⁷

⁷ We seem to lack a term that might neatly cover these other activities: 'research' and 'scholarship', for example, are increasingly used in ways that do not fit. 'Research' is now exclusively and narrowly tied to publication (and is informed by notions like 'productivity'), whereas 'scholarship' often now implies that the person concerned is

The danger that concerns me here, and why I insist there is a tension, is that in radically changing our focus, and in breaking the intimate connection between our teaching and these other activities, we will undermine the special relationship we have with our students as members of our communities of enquiry and practice.

EQUALS ARE NEEDED...

If we are not, then, merely the handmaidens of economic competitiveness or the mechanics of moral progress, what role do we have as university teachers? We need to think about this in the context of the nature of the university. Here it is tempting to engage in what Phillips Griffiths once called ‘a deduction of universities’ (1965). This is an attempt, he says, “to show what a university essentially is” and to “understand the institution in terms of a justifiable Ideal.” The enterprise is thus both descriptive and prescriptive; attempting, at once, to say what a university is and what it ought to be. Even at the time he wrote this, Phillips Griffiths was well aware of how uncongenial such an enterprise is to the modern ear. How much more so now, with an increasingly diverse range of degree programmes available in a comparably diverse range of institutions with assorted ‘missions’—yet all of whom make claim to the title ‘university’. Of course, the reality of such diversity does not detract from the establishment of a paradigm or the delineation of an archetype or exemplar of a certain sort of educational institution. And the value of this is that helps us see what Alastair MacIntyre has similarly called the university’s “peculiar or essential function”; that is, “that function which, were it not to exist, no other institution could discharge” (1990, p.222).

MacIntyre’s own proposal is that “universities are places where conceptions of and standards of rational justification are elaborated, put to work in the detailed practices of enquiry, and themselves rationally evaluated” (ibid.). In itself, this seems right; but there is noticeably little about education or learning in what he says. He does remark that this activity has produced “an educated public with shared standards of rational justification” (p.223); but this is presented as an achievement of the past and, in any case, seems a subsidiary and accidental outcome to the activities that constitute higher learning. Yet, as Phillips Griffiths notes, the sort of activity MacIntyre describes is ‘peculiarly compatible’ with university teaching: “For certain kinds of teaching, at any rate, are nothing but the practice of the activity in public” (Phillips Griffiths 1965, p.196; cf. Wisdom 1934, p.2). So, if we want to point to an essential function of the university—one which, were the university not to exist, no other institution could discharge—perhaps we should look for it in the intimate relationship one finds in the university between teaching and the broader set of intellectual endeavours I spoke of earlier.⁸

engaged in an activity that results in something less than an original contribution to her subject (and is sometimes glossed as being ‘research aware’; i.e. aware of the research of others). The distinction, therefore, seems to be one between writing and reading, respectively.

⁸ This is what is sometimes referred to as the ‘research-teaching nexus’; though its nature is often left opaque.

David Hamlyn, following and expanding upon Philips Griffiths, thought there were two essential functions that the university fulfilled (Hamlyn 1996). The first is to push back the frontiers of knowledge. This does not mean simply the discovery of new facts, but may also involve critical reflection and interpretation and can be construed broadly enough to capture the elaboration and evaluation of standards of rationality. The second essential function is to ensure the continuance of the first. It is often the first of these that springs to mind for many academics as the essence of the university, as it apparently did for Jaspers. “Research belongs to the university,” he says, “...because the university itself exists for research, fulfils its meaning through research” (1959, p.53-54). As a matter of fact, it is highly questionable that this *alone* is essential, at least in the sense understood by MacIntyre. Many types of institution are now engaged in knowledge production. Indeed, some would claim that universities will increasingly find their traditional role as the dominant producers of knowledge usurped by institutions in and of the wider world (e.g. Barnett, op. cit.).

This fact might provide encouragement to those proposing the specialisation of the sector, with the establishment of research centres of excellence and so-called teaching-only institutions; but such a proposal ignores the way a commitment to knowledge production is essential to the university in another way; in providing the apposite context for teaching at this level (i.e. for teaching that purports to be an example of *higher learning*).⁹ Unaccompanied research and scholarship—or whatever we wish to call such activities—may not be the university’s peculiar or essential function; but research and scholarship may still be necessary features of a university.

It is only because there is such a context for teaching that the university is able to fulfil the second of Hamlyn’s essential functions; to ensure the continuance of knowledge production. The other types of institution engaged in pushing back the frontiers of knowledge enjoy a parasitic existence for they rely upon the university to keep up the supply of researchers and scholars which staff them—something as true today as when Jaspers noted the same (Jaspers, p.44). For Hamlyn, then, facilitating “the extension of knowledge both now *and in the future*” is the defining function of a university (Hamlyn, p.217—original emphasis). As this is the case, this function must colour the nature of the learning that takes place in such an institution. As I say, a university education is essentially the business of making replacements.

In fact, this is not quite right. Here I need to modify my thesis and introduce the important qualification I spoke of earlier. All this talk of ‘replacements’ and the ‘future’ of knowledge production does not quite capture the degree of intimacy our teaching has with the general practice of our subject disciplines. It is not just about ensuring the continuance of these disciplines but is also methodological and performative and is concerned with the legitimacy and competence of their practitioners in the here and now.

⁹ One suspects that ‘teaching-only’ would actually indicate an institution where research is not contractually recognised or otherwise supported, rather than one where no research is undertaken.

Before replacements are ensured, a prior aim must be fulfilled. University teaching is not simply about making replacements but is about making *interlocutors*, who may then become replacements. This point was grasped by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. Sure enough, as he says, “Didactics is what ensures this reproduction takes place” (1979, p.24). More importantly, however, it is also a question of the pragmatic dialectical requirements of the practices in which we are engaged and the authority, legitimacy and competence of those who engage in them.

One’s competence is never an accomplished fact. It depends upon whether or not the statement proposed is considered by one’s peers to be worth discussion in a sequence of argument and refutation. (ibid.)

The point is a fairly obvious one with respect to competence: it is that one’s proficiency in a practice requires one’s on-going and sustained exercise in that practice, with one’s work continually subject to the evaluation of one’s peers. Thus, one’s competence as a philosopher, historian, mathematician etc. depends on one’s continued engagement with the communal practice which constitutes one’s subject discipline and on the iterative judgements of what Lyotard calls one’s partners. Disciplinary competence is something fragile and always provisional rather than something guaranteed or established by the mere award of a qualification.

More controversial, perhaps, is the idea that interlocutors are indispensable for the very conduct of the discipline. A reliable source of interlocutors is required for, as Lyotard says, “the nonrenewal of the requisite skills would eventually bring an end to the necessary, contradictory debate” (ibid.). Implicit in this remark is more than the recognition that we need future scientist and scholars. There is also the recognition that the practice of academic subject disciplines is essentially bilateral and dialogic, with a ‘sequence of argument’ at their core. This remains true even where the practitioner works in isolation: we work as if our peers are present.

Whether a completely solitary activity meets the conditions of adequacy for being a ‘practice’ is deep philosophical water into which I am wary of stepping lightly, as I must here. As Wittgenstein remarks, the question comes down to one like this: ‘Can a solitary person carry on a trade?’ (1978, p. 349). However, it seems to me possible for a Robinson Crusoe (i.e. an isolated individual, but not someone raised in isolation like a wolf-child) to engage in something like the ‘necessary, contradictory debate’ and thus to engage in something we would call, say, philosophy—but that is the point, it is what *we* would call philosophy. Whether what he is doing is philosophy or not is indeterminate in his isolated state. That is to say, he could not say that it was and he certainly could not guarantee that it was. Whether his behaviour counts or not depends on whether it conforms to the normative constraints of a communal practice and, by and large, on the judgements of those who constitute the community engaged in the practice. It depends on the judgement of other people, of other philosophers.

With all this in mind we can see how the creation of these significant others, these partners, is a crucial activity for the academy. “Equals are needed and must be created,” as Lyotard succinctly puts it (ibid.).

...AND MUST BE CREATED

Of course, their formation could be a by-product of an activity engaged in for its own sake, or it could be a by-product of an activity engaged in for some other end—an emergence rather than a creation, if you like. Therefore, it might be argued, the creation of equals need not be the *aim* of university teaching or any of the other activities that take place in a university. But a dialogue with one’s peers and the requirement to ensure continuance of the practice are too important as outcomes to leave to chance: the emergence of equals could be so but is not so.¹⁰ Whether or not the practice of a subject discipline is itself self-contained, or is something engaged in for its own sake, it seems clear that the teaching of a subject discipline is a purposive activity aimed at some or other end. I submit that the end to which it is aimed is primarily internal to the subject disciplines concerned—that is, it serves their needs as outlined—and, as such, forms the basis of an ‘internal’ relationship with our students.

Accordingly, they are assessed according to the ‘ground rules’ of their subject disciplines—and according to these *alone*. That is to say, their verbal and written contributions are evaluated and marked according to the particular styles, argumentative and rhetorical principles and standards, research methods, modes of address, relevant social norms and conventions, applicable subject specific facts, etc. specific to the disciplinary genres in which they are working. Descriptions of course content, learning outcomes, assessment criteria, as well as comments and feedback all pay close attention to these ground rules. An ‘internal’ relationship is possible because the students are themselves working within the subject discipline and are thus members of that particular community of enquiry and practice with the privileges and responsibilities membership affords. Hence, I regard the creation of equals as coming closer to a legitimate aim of university teaching than any other, certainly closer than the fashionable and utilitarian aims commonly proposed in the public debate about the nature and role of the university.

In this debate—just to remind ourselves—what is important is to teach skills directly relevant to economy, or the cultivation of good citizens with the right sensibilities. My complaint is not that we could not teach *directly* to these other ends; but we could not do so *at the same time* as teaching philosophy, history or mathematics. Doing so would thus destroy the university as we presently understand it. Learning to think, write and argue as a philosopher, for example, is wholly different from learning a genre appropriate to most employment—even if elements of what is learnt do have some more generic applicability. Thus, to teach directly to these other ends would be to give up teaching philosophy, history or mathematics, for doing so would undermine the necessary relation

¹⁰ This is not to say that it can never happen. We can, of course, think of the self-taught outsider who erupts onto the scene. But consider just how *rare* such cases are.

our teaching has to the practice of our subject disciplines.¹¹ It would also be to give up on a particular, close relationship we have with our students. Arguably, it is only in a university that the process of creating equals takes place; precisely because of the nature of our teaching and its connection to the practice of our disciplines. What, then, is the nature of this connection and close relationship?

“Education at a university is Socratic by its very nature,” Jaspers confidently declares (1959: 52). He distinguishes this from what he regards as two other basic forms of education: (i) scholastic instruction, which sounds a very dull affair, consisting in the mechanical transmission of systematised knowledge by a teacher who is little more than a conduit for established ideas or discoveries; and (ii) apprenticeship, which Jaspers almost makes sound like demagoguery, with an emphasis on authority, discipline, power and personality. In contrast, a Socratic education emphasises freedom, responsibility and a search for truth.

In Socratic education, the teacher and his student ought to stand on the same level. Both are meant to be free. ... The Socratic teacher resists his students’ urge to make him their authority and master. ... The intimate relationship between student and teacher here is not one of submission, but of a contest for truth. The teacher knows that he is only human, demands that his students differentiate between human and divine. (ibid., p.50)

Unfortunately, not even Socrates taught in a way that conforms to this rather romantic portrayal of a Socratic education. On this view, the student appears to be an autodidact and intellectual dilettante who is already the equal of the academic; but this is hopelessly idealised. As the student’s education takes place in an institutional setting and consists in working towards a formal qualification, there cannot but be constraints on the student’s freedom and unequal relationships of power. But, apart from such bureaucratic and pragmatic considerations, there are obvious inequalities in the respective hold of the academic and the student on the disciplinary practice. As Lyotard rightly observes, but Jaspers fails to notice, the pragmatics of pedagogy, at least in the early stages, are not the same as those of research (Lyotard 1979, p.25). There cannot be an equality of status of the type he advocates until the student finds her footing in the practice. In fact, the student *is* rather like an apprentice who receives training in a discipline. The neophyte participates in the academic practice in anticipation of understanding and the development of her own voice and must trust the expert practitioner to guide her performances through repeated practical demonstrations of the art. The equality and

¹¹ A good proportion of a mathematics degree is of little direct relevance in a graduate career, including those with a maths component. Even the seemingly more ‘relevant’, ‘applied’ or ‘vocationally orientated’ courses in a university are, in essence, academic subjects with their own autonomous ground rules. Colleagues in business schools regularly complain of the difficulties they have in managing the expectations of applicants, students, managers and outside parties, who tend not to see business studies as an essentially academic subject discipline but merely geared to needs of those outside itself.

freedom Jaspers extols is an eventual achievement made through a process of initiation into the practice.

Learning takes place largely through guided imitation and example, normally in the presence of the teacher-practitioner, with students mimicking ‘the public practice of the activity.’ Jaspers seems ambivalent on how far the presence of the teacher is necessary. On the one hand, he is happy for the student to “get on with books alone, without benefit of teachers” (1959, p.54). On the other hand, he recognises how “[t]hrough his tone, his gestures, the real presence of his thinking the lecturer can unconsciously convey the ‘feel’ of the subject” and how the “printed lecture, perhaps even taken down word for word, is a pale residue” (ibid., p.57). His view seems to be that it is not categorically required, but it is preferable. In other words, one might ‘be in the presence’ of another through a medium such as print, and no doubt can learn to imitate key elements of the practice; but this is a poor substitute for the rich unpredictability of the personal, embodied presence of the teacher-practitioner.¹²

Two things flow from the fact that guided imitation and example are central to the learning process. First, as I have argued elsewhere (González Arnal & Burwood 2003; Burwood 2007), much of what is learnt is tacitly acquired and resists linguistic articulation and tutoring simply by precept or maxims. As Phillips Griffiths also notes, the study of a subject such as philosophy, history or mathematics are universal activities in the sense that they are open-ended and ‘bounce back’ at one from new and unpredictable angles (they possess what he terms ‘reciprocity’). As a consequence, their underlying principles are difficult to capture in terms of precepts and are, rather, made manifest in the activity itself and mostly exist only in use. Because of this tacit dimension, the process requires one to be in the presence of a more accomplished (and preferably an expert) practitioner.

[F]or anyone to be introduced to a universal activity, he must be in the presence of someone who practises it, and who does so in a way which shows most manifestly the standards and principles of the activity. There is no way of introducing people to these activities except by helping them to practise them. But no one can simply be *instructed* how to practise them. (Phillips Griffiths 1965: p.196)

Second, *pace* Jaspers, learning does require the student’s willing submission to authority, as well as his or her trust—at least at the initial stages, and at least if the student is not some sort of genius. Until she has become able to see the overall coherence of the

¹² The educational importance of the teacher’s embodied presence has been stressed by others; notably by Michael Polanyi (1958), Michael Oakeshott (1962) and, more recently, Hubert Dreyfus (2001). It is also clearly an element of Phillips-Griffith’s account of university teaching (1965), as well as John Wisdom’s description of teaching philosophy (see 1934, p.2). For further discussion of Dreyfus’ views, see the symposium on his *On the Internet in Educational Philosophy and Theory* 34 (4) 2002. It remains an issue that requires greater examination.

disciplinary practice, and gets a feel for the way things are done, the neophyte is not able to reliably judge the appropriateness or inappropriateness of moves within the practice. Acquiescence and trust is doubly required given the often tacit nature of the principles or ground rules underlying the practice. This point is Michael Polanyi's:

To learn by example is to submit to authority. You follow your master because you trust his manner of doing things even when you cannot analyze and account in detail for its effectiveness. By watching the master and emulating his efforts in the presence of his example, the apprentice unconsciously picks up the rules of the art, including those which are not explicitly known to the master himself. These hidden rules can be assimilated only by a person who surrenders himself to that extent uncritically to the imitation of another. (1958, p. 53)

There is, indeed, an emphasis on authority here; but this is not the authority of brute power but of legitimacy and competence and is therefore primarily epistemic and a question of expertise. Brute power actually features more in Jaspers' model: because the student is absolutely free and independent, the 'intimate relationship' between student and faculty is one forged as combatants engaged in an agonistic struggle over truth. But submission to authority does not rule out student freedom. The student submits in order to *achieve* freedom within the practice. Also, we must not forget that it is the often case that equality and freedom are imminent in the practice of the subject discipline itself, this being analytical and bilateral, as Lyotard reminds us.¹³

STOOPING TO CONQUER

An interlocutor is not a replica. An emphasis on the authority of the teacher does not mean that we require the unqualified conformity of the student. The induction of a student into the disciplinary practice does not therefore equate to Jasper's model of scholastic education or to any simple transmission model. An important reason why this is so is because of the nature of the very disciplinary practice into which the student is being inducted. A degree of equality and freedom is, to some extent, assured by the nature of the practices which the student is learning. For example, a central feature of the practice of many subject disciplines, but perhaps particularly philosophy (my own), is criticality. We teach our students to interrogate and evaluate texts and arguments; to question what they read and are told and not to take things at face value (including, as above, notions such as 'diversity' and 'sustainability' and other shibboleths). On occasions, we also encourage the students' critical evaluation of what *we* say. Needless to say, we can and do learn much from our students and even the best of us may be justifiably challenged by the greenest beginner (cf. Phillips Griffiths 1965, pp.196-197).

¹³ Though, by emphasising the transmission of 'indisputable truths' at early stages of learning, Lyotard misses how equality and freedom may be embodied in the dialectical requirements of the discipline, as I discuss in the next section (see Lyotard 1979, p.25). However, we must remember that Lyotard was writing of an education in the sciences and, of course, in the context of the French academy.

The reason is, of course, because neophyte and master must both submit to the rules of the art, as Polanyi calls them.

There is a sense in which Jaspers is therefore right when he says that the teacher “resists his students’ urge to make him their authority and master” (p.50). The students’ submission is not total and is the case more with the rules of the art rather than specific content. The degree to which there is this freedom to question, however, depends upon a number of factors. One is a question of general academic culture: it is generally true in English speaking universities but has not necessarily been a feature of other traditions—even other European traditions. Another is the custom of the particular subject discipline: criticality is an important aspect of learning in philosophy and the humanities, where argumentation dominates disciplinary practice, but is less so in other, more empirically based disciplines—though the degree to which this is true depends on a third, crucial factor. This is the student’s stage of initiation into her discipline at any given moment: the critical evaluation of a freshman is likely to be more circumscribed than that of the sophomore or graduate. Such factors conspire to produce a complex picture of student freedom across the university and the higher education sector as a whole.

To a large extent, then, student freedom is a question of academic etiquette and is dependent on the cultural norms determining the context in which one is working. But this is not the whole story; it is also dependent upon the norms governing the conduct of the subject disciplines. What Lyotard also gets right is that, at later stages, the pragmatics of pedagogy and the pragmatics of research gradually coincide (1979, p.25). The good student is the one for whom these the rules of the art become second nature and who is able to successfully imitate the work of the professional.¹⁴ But successfully imitating the professional does not mean being biddable or subservient to an orthodoxy. Given the dialogic nature of the rules of the art, especially the pivotal role of criticality, and the uncertainties involved in the pragmatics of research, in creating interlocutors who eventually become our equals, there is a real sense in which university teaching is a process whereby we maintain the possibility of disagreement and difference in our fields of enquiry. If study in an academic subject discipline at university is something like an apprenticeship, it is essentially an apprenticeship in disagreement. One submits in order to be free to disagree.

Of course, submitting in order to be free is fraught with a peril very different from the risk of independence noted by Jaspers: here the danger is clearly that of the suffocating embrace of tradition and conformity. In order to gain a voice, as MacIntyre laments, subversion is itself subverted by having to adopt the very mode of address it seeks to undermine (1990, p.219). This seems inescapable, however, if one’s form of transgression is not to be so radical that it is completely beside the point. Consequently, there are limits to which even expert practitioners can question the nature of their own practice; limits which are conceptual and not just a question of manners or the fetters of an orthodoxy. At some point, one’s eccentricity turns into mere incongruence: one

¹⁴ After all, the highest praise one commonly hears given to a student’s written work is that it is of publishable quality: that is, that it could ‘pass’ as the work of a professional.

simply ceases to be practicing anything remotely recognisable as philosophy, history or mathematics.

But although they can come to be dominated by a given paradigm, the practices that make up a subject disciplines are not monolithic, nor are the governing rules of the art immutable or sacrosanct. Submission to the rules of the art is tempered by the way the consensus may be challenged and *is* continually challenged from within the practice itself. By and large, the rules of the art are *descriptive* of the practice: they are what they are at any given moment because that is what the practice at that given moment consists in. Like Wittgenstein's 'river bed of thoughts' (1969, §97), what may be solid at one time, may become fluid at another, and *vice versa*, so that our practices may change and what was once definitive becomes an historical curiosity or—like Mick Jagger receiving a knighthood—what was once dangerously unconventional becomes disappointingly but predictably establishment. Nonetheless, this plasticity does not mean that the rules are optional or that anything goes.

Therefore, the university is, in a small but significant way, already the “place of constrained disagreement” that MacIntyre advocates but does not think currently exists (p.231). True enough, this is not exactly his grand vision of an institution where “antagonistic dialogue between fundamentally conflicting and incommensurable standpoints” takes place (p.221); but it is not incompatible with it—assuming such a vision is actually coherent.¹⁵ The rules of the art provide a framework for collaborative disagreement and for an organised community of enquiry in a particular domain.¹⁶ In being inducted into the rules of the art, the student is thereby received into her respective community of enquiry and practice.

THREE CONSEQUENCES ...

A number of related issues arise as a result of the foregoing discussion. The first, to return to the controversial truth and its corollary which I introduced at the outset, is the narrow focus my account gives to a university education in a subject discipline. Rather

¹⁵ A dialogue between incommensurable standpoints sounds like an oxymoron, especially if what makes them incommensurable is a complete lack of agreement on such things as standards of rational justification or rhetorical procedure. As Plato was aware, disagreement always presupposes *some* background of agreement. In fact, MacIntyre's examples—what he calls Thomistic, encyclopaedic, and genealogical—do not strike one as standpoints sufficiently at variance to count as incommensurable, just radically different (having *incompatible* views on such things as the nature of the self (p.231), for example, does not entail incommensurability).

¹⁶ What I have termed collaborative disagreement MacIntyre calls 'creative rational disagreement.' He seems to think, however, that such collaborative disagreement is a feature only of the pre-liberal modern university and that the liberal institution is instead characterised—at least in the humanities and social sciences—by a *faux*-technical expertise masquerading as 'unconstrained rational agreement' or, what is perhaps worse, an 'unconstrained and limitless disagreement' (p.225).

than ‘narrow’, I prefer the epithet ‘humble’. As I have argued, our teaching is directed toward students *qua* scholars and scientists-to-be and is wholly indifferent to students *qua* economically productive citizens with commendable sensibilities fitting to the modern world. As only a tiny proportion of the very best students actually become scholars or scientists, there is a sense in which our teaching is therefore self-regarding, concerned solely with internal standards of excellence and student performance in terms of the rules of the art. As such, one can see how such a model might be condemned as representing a ‘decent into virtuosity’ (Smith 2003). Following on from this, one can see how our teaching appears to be directed at this elite few—to those who will eventually become our partners, our equals. These are the uncomfortable truths that lie behind Jaspers’ dispiriting claim with which I began.

In this paper I have entered a guilty plea to these charges; but here I want to appeal for mitigation. It does not follow from any of this that other students—those who Jaspers disparages as the “mediocre majority”—leave with nothing. Nor is it actually true that our teaching is aimed solely at an academic elite, still less that we have an obligation to teach only such students or that the rest can be left to go to the dogs. Jaspers is simply wrong on both counts. In being concerned with the production of scholars and scientists-to-be, it only *appears* that our teaching is directed at a small cadre of the gifted. We do not know in advance who these are and, in any case, the production of future scholars and scientists is perfectly compatible with the aim of enabling all our students to achieve their individual potential as philosophers, historians or mathematicians, even if this falls some way short of professional expertise.

It is also true that a university education normally means much more than study in a subject discipline; so that the student’s wider university experience will furnish outcomes beneficial to lives outside academe. Nonetheless, we can also add that, even though our teaching is, or should be, indifferent to the wider world, it is not irrelevant to it. Happily, or so we like to believe, in learning to be philosophers, historians or mathematicians all our students acquire skills, dispositions or habits of thought and behaviour that have utility in the world outside. But these are *accidental* and *emergent* outcomes of an activity engaged in for other ends and, in any case, like happiness, may not be something we can deliberately set out to achieve.¹⁷ As John Donne reminds us, the way to attain truth at the top of the hill is not by blundering our way directly up the incline; instead we “about must, and about must goe.”¹⁸

This connects to the second issue: the relation between, on the one hand, learning and teaching in a university and, on the other, the broader set of intellectual endeavours that are characteristic of enquiry in our subject disciplines. Lyotard says that, in the need for

¹⁷ I must thank Kelly Heuer for reminding me of the analogy with the paradox of hedonism, where one’s happiness can be attained only by *not* making it one’s direct goal (see Mill 1873).

¹⁸ “On a huge hill, Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will Reach her, about must, and about must goe; And what th’hill’s suddenness resists, winne so.” Satyre III, lines 79-82 (Donne 1967, p.13).

partners, “It should be evident that research appeals to teaching as its necessary complement” (1979, p.24). As he implies and I have argued, it appeals to a specific kind of teaching: one which sees itself as an initiation into the practices of the student’s chosen field or fields of enquiry and thus, eventually, into the what he terms the ‘dialectics of research’ in that field. Some recent research suggests that the very ‘higher level skills’ so sought after by government ministers and graduate employers are best developed in university departments which regard student progression as an induction into the discipline and an ‘ability to do the subject’, rather than as instrumentally acquiring generic skills—where study in the subject discipline merely provides the occasion for this (Mclean & Barker, 2004). Contrariwise, teaching that reflects an impatience to impart these and other saleable skills directly merely results in the de-motivation of faculty and students and confusion over why the curriculum is the way it is (ibid.). Education is often a curious and roundabout affair.

It also seems that regarding student progression in terms of a process of becoming a practising philosopher, historian or mathematician is more common in departments with a research culture (ibid.). So, does this mean that all university teachers should engage in research and scholarship? This is, of course, probably the most contentious issue in higher education, with the idea of a mutually beneficial link between the two having come under sustained attack in recent years. The most dramatic example of this in the UK was the Blair government’s White Paper on Higher Education, *The Future of Higher Education* (2003), which proposed concentrating research in certain universities and recommended others to redirect their energies into “other parts of their mission” (paragraph 2.6)—as if a university were made of Lego and its functions were entirely modular.¹⁹

I cannot here defend the idea of a link between research and scholarship and university teaching, but I do not think this is simply an empirical question to be decided by a statistical analysis of student performance measured against research outputs. I have conceded the possibility that equals may ‘emerge’ in other circumstances, perhaps even the most impoverished of educational contexts; but I consider it considerably less likely. But apart from the pragmatic issues of such a link, the connection between our teaching and the broader activities of faculty speaks directly to what we take ourselves to be doing when we teach and what we take the relationship we have with our students to be, regardless of any statistics. It is about having a coherent conception of higher learning and the values that inform this conception.

It has been suggested that, while being an active researcher is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for being a good university teacher, it is a ‘strong condition’ for it (Barnett 2000). Although I think this is probably correct, the foregoing discussion suggests a slightly more nuanced conclusion: if higher learning involves learning *in*

¹⁹ And is something repeated in the UK government’s more recent statements. Thus, John Denham asserts, “I am in no doubt that our world leading position ... depends on an appropriate concentration of research effort” (Denham 2008). It is not clear, and is never made clear by proponents, why this should be so in the case of many subjects.

rather than merely *about* a subject, a good university teacher should be an active practitioner of her subject discipline. Though publication seems to me to be neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for being an active practitioner, perhaps it too is a 'strong condition' for it. This, at least, is an open question; but it is clear that university teaching must stand in *some* relation to the practice of the subject disciplines and cannot be completely divorced from it.

This leads me to the third and final issue arising from the foregoing discussion: the sort of relationship we have with our students. I have argued that, in regarding the aim of our teaching as a process of creating interlocutors and eventually our equals (i.e. in regarding students as scholars and scientists to be), our students are considered members of our particular communities of enquiry, with the privileges and responsibilities such membership affords. This applies to *all* our students, and not just to the tiny minority who may actually be scholars and scientists in the making.

Part of the problem with Jaspers' conception of a university education is that, on his model, as well as there being hardly anything that counts as teaching, there is hardly anything that could count as a community. In his concern to present the student as a completely independent, autonomous learner who has a Socratic equality of status, his model represents students as autodidacts who just happen to be attached to a centre of learning. The only thing that binds students to faculty is that both have a lofty interest in the pursuit of truth. However, it is the total lack of constraints in Jaspers' model that accounts for why, despite what I am sure were contrary intentions, he ends up sounding so elitist and exclusionary. In fact, it is because there are constraints and authority in the faculty-student relationship, in the context of training in the academic subject discipline, that we can think about the relationship in terms of a more inclusive model. I have termed this an 'internal' relationship and it is crucially different from models accompanying alternative conceptions of university teaching.

For example, it has become almost routine for managers, administrators and, sadly, some academic colleagues in universities to refer to students as 'customers'. The popularity of this practice has coincided with a shift in the academy's self-perception, with an emphasis on 'service' and the 'delivery' of a curriculum thought to serve the needs of the student as an individual consumer of educational products with a worldly utility. And it is no accident that the notion of the student as an autonomous learner again makes an appearance. It may be that this fashion for calling students customers is an unconscious and well-meaning attempt to assuage the coarser elements of a commercial and corporatist mindset and empower students in the circumstances of its ascendancy, particularly by emphasising inclusion. Nonetheless, as I have argued before (Burwood 2002), it is profoundly mistaken in this regard.

The practice is, in fact, corrosive of the idea that students are participating members of the communities of practice that constitute the university. Unlike university students, customers are not members of the organisations where they spend their money and have no entitlements other than to purchase or take their business elsewhere. Customers are

merely outsiders. Thus, to regard students in this way is, in point of fact, alienating and exclusionary and is to establish an 'external' relationship between faculty and student.

...AND A CONCLUSION

It is in the particulars of the teaching relationship that we find a richer conception of a community, one which provides resources for our resistance to the unwelcome imposition of inappropriate commercial or corporatist models of higher education. This is why I have said that the idea that learning in a subject discipline is a process of induction into a given field of enquiry, with little or no concern for the needs of the student in the wider world, is a truth that academics should be prepared to accept, even to welcome. Far from being elitist and exclusionary, it positively shapes our relationship to all our students in a way that is beneficial and inclusive, placing students firmly at the academic heart of the university.

I recognise, however, that such claims are politically difficult. It may be objected that this essay is, at worst, a form of the self-indulgent nostalgia that often infects such reflections or, at best, a normative project, naively outlining an archaic vision of what university teaching should be—both typically characteristic of out-of-touch and unrealistic academics. I reject both suggestions. It may be the delineation of an ideal; but it is rooted in an understanding of what we are actually doing at the chalk face. To recognise *this* is to recognise precisely why they are politically difficult claims to make. The academy, perforce, has an uneasy relation with power and the outside world, something captured perfectly by Phillips Griffiths:

The centre of learning, existing as it must outside Eden, demands a great deal from the community in which it exists. It demands its keep; and (what may be more difficult to give) it demands its indulgence, for it is a place where the most important prejudices, which may be essential for the stability or even the existence of its surrounding community, may have to be questioned, and perhaps destroyed (1965: 193).

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