The Disciplines as Social Imaginary: investigating radical re-inventions of the higher education curriculum (0213)

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In recent years, a number of universities around the world have undertaken high-profile initiatives to re-structure their undergraduate curricula. The intentions usually concern a shift away from specialist degrees to broader curricula structured around themes, often through a concern to enable students to rise to the challenges of the complexities of 21st Century life. In this paper we will examine these shifts, and question whether disciplinary specialisation is an inadequate preparation for the perceived challenges of the contemporary climate. We will use the theories of Cornelius Castoriadis to interrogate the potential constraints of disciplinary structures as well as to question whether the new discourses around contemporary challenges are in fact offering us anything 'new'.

Castoriadis' work on the social imaginary puts forward the notion that institutions and structures are the creation of collective imagination. Castoriadis proposes that the power of creation, intrinsic to each individual, is embodied by what he calls the 'radical imagination' at the individual level and which becomes the 'instituting social imaginary' at the social level (Castoridis 2007). This collective imaginative power structures societies and institutions, and individuals become tied to the representations of these social imaginaries. These meanings and representations are what Castoriadis calls 'social imaginary significations' (Castoriadis 2007) and they establish a social world proper to each society with its articulations, rules, purposes and norms.

Drawing from Castoriadis' conception of the social imaginary, we argue here that the academic discipline constitutes one type of social world which represents the social imaginary. This social imaginary is a common understanding which makes possible common practices and a shared sense of legitimacy (Taylor 2004). Disciplines are representations of collective meaning-making to which individuals, through a long process of study, become tied and through which much of their academic identity is shaped.

In this sense, disciplinary traditions, transmitted knowledge, rules of conduct, linguistic are produced by the social imaginary of disciplinary communities. The higher education curriculum can be seen as one of the most visible, institutionalized 'social imaginary significations' which helps maintain the boundaries around academic disciplinary practices and identities. Previous research on the higher education curriculum has indicated the extent to which perceptions of the curriculum are tied to notions of subject content, or disciplinary knowledge (Fraser and Bosanquet 2006; Barnett and Coate 2005). It is precisely this disciplinary specialisation of the higher education curriculum at undergraduate level which is currently being problematized by 'new' models of curriculum.

The 'new' models of curriculum, such as those being developed at the University of Melbourne and Arizona State University, propose to break away from disciplinary 'silos' to encourage greater interdisciplinarity and a broader approach that fosters creativity and flexibility. It is suggested that through these new models students can be educated to adapt to the complexities of the modern age. Although this discourse of empowerment and innovation is seductive, we want to question whether traditional disciplinary structures are as much of a constraint to this 'new' way of thinking as has been suggested.

A first reading of Castoriadis might suggest that disciplinary constraints are a hindrance. Much of Castoriadis' work is concerned with the development of autonomous human beings, an aim which

'new' curriculum developers would presumably support. His writing shows that the development of autonomous human beings is a central project of modernity, and autonomy requires the questioning of our own institutions. To Castoriadis, the concept of autonomy is intrinsically related to the idea of resistance against determinacy, in the sense that the project of autonomy calls for an individual and collective capacity to question the social imaginary significations of the society and its institutions (Castoriadis 2007). In the context of HE, this project of critical interrogation is arguably constrained by disciplinary structures. Boundaries of meanings instituted by the social imaginary of disciplinary communities constrain academics in their practices and identities. A self-questioning of their disciplinary world and the possibility of acting on it (Castoriadis 2007) is very difficult.

Yet do the 'new' models of curricula being proposed, such as those at the University of Melbourne and Arizona State University, offer an education which enables students to interrogate the disciplines? The claim that these models are a 'radical restructuring' of curricula does not seem to hold up under closer scrutiny. In each case, the 'new' curriculum resembles a traditional liberal arts programme rather than a radically re-structured one. The claim of greater openness and flexibility within the curriculum is not borne out by some of the criticisms that are emerging from academics and students, particularly within the University of Melbourne. Castoriadis' ideas of the social imaginary help us to understand just how difficult it is to imagine 'otherwise' and create a truly radical, new curriculum in higher education.

We might also question whether the discourse that has been appropriated by universities to promote these 'new' models, utilising the now familiar terminology of complexity, challenges, innovation, creativity, and empowerment, is itself contributing to a radical project and the development of greater autonomy. The 'new' curriculum models are being imposed in a top-down manner, with a great deal of promotional 'spin' (with slogans such as 'dream large'), which itself might be seen as disempowering rather than empowering. The breaking away from disciplinary silos has led perhaps not to a radical new curriculum but to the abandonment in some cases of traditional disciplinary departments (such as philosophy at Melbourne). The 'nimbleness' that is promoted through the re-structuring seems to favour the type of flexibility that enables managers to cut down on the expense of maintaining certain disciplines.

We would suggest that, rather than being subjected to a top-down imposition of 'new' curriculum models, true re-imagination might come from the bottom up, as academics within traditional disciplinary structures explore the boundaries of those structures and interrogate them. A critique of the social imaginary will emerge most effectively from those who have the expertise to understand the limitations and uncertainties of their own disciplines.

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