

## UNIs and CONTINUING EDUCATION

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Comments on Philip Candy et als, 1994, *Developing Lifelong Learners through Undergraduate Education*. AGPS.)

Some facts about undergraduate education are very clear. Final examinations establish whether undergraduates have learnt what is laid in their curricula. Certificates are issued to establish how well this learning appears to have been done. These certificates do not have 'a use-by date': they retain some socially tradeable value for a bearer's lifetime. There are many variations around this pattern but this is overwhelmingly the dominant pattern. This pattern defines purposes that are not different from the purposes of primary and secondary education. The certificate is a warranty that the person has at the time of examination demonstrated a mastery of a certain body of knowledge, Implicit in this is that mastery is only established for the conditions represented by the methods of examination. The certificate can no more give assurance that the mastery will transfer to other 'non exam' conditions than it can give assurance that the mastery will, like bike riding skills, persist through a lifetime. Despite persuasive evidence that undergraduate education rarely meets the conditions for producing transferrable or persistent knowledge we persist in believing otherwise. It is usually only at the PHD level that we insist on a more realistic test of mastery, namely, that the student demonstrate an ability to make contributions to our knowledge.

It has been assumed that the years spent by young adults in a university setting have contributed to developing people who are in general better educated, more respectful of academic learning (both book learning and scientific studies), more critical attitude to animism, mysticism or appeals to traditional authority, more tolerant of differences in personality, though not more tolerant of character differences or differences in gender, ethnicity or age. Nor more tolerant of new ideas that, since Kuhn, might be classed as anti the ruling paradigm.

These assumptions appear to be well founded. (Hyman, H.....). The differences were seen as a product of acculturation in the university environment, social osmosis rather than deliberate education. This process was seen as most likely to occur in a live-in college arrangement or where the university was in a university town. It was seen as less likely to occur in metropolitan universities catering to day students.

The question of how the undergraduate years contribute to lifelong continuing learning is a relatively new question. It has been argued that his concern has arisen from recognition of the 'rapid multidimensional change in our knowledge'. The rate of change is seen as requiring continued learning to update the graduate certificate. That need would be met by the universities and professional bodies providing more refresher courses, using the same methods of teaching used at universities and much the same staff possibly supplemented by leading researchers and practitioners. It would not in itself, require a change in motivation of the learners as undergraduates or graduates.

It is likely that something more is involved.

I think that it is that ‘social osmosis’ cannot be relied upon to serve the ‘higher purposes’ of university education. The osmotic process worked well enough when the core of the students come from an elite strata who valued higher education and that core was concerned with finding a place for themselves in the next generation of elites.

The university teachers had an easy job. Their intake of students had been selected for their extrinsic motivation and their willingness ‘to swot and cram’. The teaching of the dead classics, Latin and Greek, by boring meaningless repetition ensured that. The teachers were under no pressure to develop the motivation that might have been intrinsic to the relation between students and subject matter.

An interim solution was found in a two tiered tertiary education system (in most Western countries). This went some way to solving the demand for an increasing proportion of the population to be highly learned in their discipline. It was only temporary as it did not serve the needs of a newly emergent and very numerous elite with very different, non feudal relations to the rest of the population. The relation was non feudal because the status of ‘expert’ was non inheritable. When the core statuses are feudal, inheritable, then experts can trade in this by demonstrating family loyalty. When all statuses are non inheritable, then this sort of parasitism is not possible.

Under these circumstances universities have to give more than lip service to their ‘higher purposes’, or be reduced to ‘certificate factories’.

The universities can take responsibility for their higher purposes if they take responsibility for ensuring that a significant proportion of their students graduate with a desire to continue learning. It would be nice to set the goal as a sustained desire to continue learning but this would be to ask more of universities, as but one institution amongst many, than they can deliver. Very recently we have had large countries that denied this possibility to graduates and denied emigration.

We must draw a distinction between pursuing additional certificates and desiring to continue learning. (Heider showed in 1938 how we could experimentally establish the difference.) I am referring to the latter, not establishing more post graduate qualifications.

An intrinsic desire for continued education can arise only if interest is aroused in the subject matter. That may often be helped by a teacher laying out a subject so as to arouse and capture the interest of a student. No matter how the interest is aroused, it will be sustained only if the student is able to take responsibility for learning and, of course, get timely feedback, and continues to find a real challenge (learning will not be seen as challenging if it is ‘too easy’ or ‘too hard’).

The six conditions (known in democratization as the 6 criteria) that have been established as affording creative working also apply to creative learning .

Beyond that, the outcomes of undergraduate learning should be reflected in reading, writing and conference going.