

Addressing Culturality: Exploring Alternative and more Authentic Routes for (Australian) Higher Education Organizations*

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Abstract

This article draws partly from the author's PhD thesis titled 'Understanding and Working with the Dynamics in Cross-Cultural Education. It further builds on her personal experiences as a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) migrant studying and lecturing in Australian higher education institutions. From a futurist and complexity theory perspective it is argued that many do not appear to be learning but colonizing organizations, and their 'ethical role' may need to be reviewed, based on an ethics of co-creativity and autopoiesis and from the perspective of higher education as a capacity building process. As the dynamics of a system do not tend toward stasis or equilibrium but toward far-from-equilibrium conditions, it is crucial to explore possible, probable and preferable futures to form a more desirable 'attractor basin'. The author reflects briefly on her experiences as a member of a learning organisation to demonstrate that in addition to individual learning, collective learning offers an appropriate avenue for scholarly evolution in the context of cultural pluralism and diversity.

Keywords: globalization, higher education, cross-cultural exchanges, ethical role, attractor basin, learning organizations.

*The author would like to express her gratefulness and thank the reviewers for freely offering their time and mindful attention. The feedback they offered was very helpful because clear, integer and insightful.

Introduction

The old adage of ivory towers still seems to apply to most Australian higher education organizations as their ‘factory model of education’ continues to serve the World Bank’s ‘Education for All’ agenda (Gidley, 2001; Gidley & Inayatullah, 2002) and their corporate rational-scientific world (Wildman & Inayatullah, 1996, as cited in Kelly, 2004, p. 187) that is not ‘culture free’ (Hutchinson, n.d.). Colonizing, homogenizing nationalist agendas underpin federal and state funding and demand a shift from collegial to business-like practices. Quality assurance controls and protocols and especially quality auditing shifts responsibility for higher education quality from essentially internally made judgements to external process of peer review and others such as quality assessment agencies (Dudley, 2009, pp. 57-58). The norm now is to outcompete one another for a decreasing amount of dollars: a norm that has also changed the relationship between higher education institution management and academic staff (ibid). This outperforming determines the direction in which higher education is headed, and –perhaps more worrying– is increasingly seen as completely acceptable if not desirable for ‘competent’ citizenship. As Dudley (2009) describes in her thesis titled ‘Higher Education, Neo-Liberalism and the Market Citizen’, the idea of ethical inclusion is a performative act now more than ever before guided by a code of ‘ethics’ that emphasizes active *economic* participation as a condition for inclusion. Not an ethics of co-creativity and autopoiesis, but a code of ‘ethics’ that is based on corporate government principles according to a neoliberal, rationalist and consumerist model guides Australian higher education institutions. Thus any ‘alive’ dynamic such as staff’s or students’ creativity and capacity for lifelong-learning is painfully denied, or squashed to fit into a corporate idea around economic success, civic responsibility and social cohesion (Dudley, 2009, pp. 62-63). As Matthew Allen, professor of Internet Studies at Curtin University in Perth, Australia suggests ‘Universities are not just portals where students access learning, they are places in which people develop as social beings, in some quite specifically institutional ways’ (Quitney, Boyles and Rainie, 2012, pp. 6-7).

Intercultural intelligence, diversity and cultural competence are perhaps discussed as ‘interesting topics’ in executive circles but they are not actively explored together with those at the middle or ‘bottom’ layers of the corporate structure or social hierarchy, and certainly not across the different ivory towers. The idea of the ‘global nomad’ (Konig, 2012) and a conceptualization of translocal geographies beyond the primacy of national spaces (Bricknell and Datta, 2011) is perhaps too unfamiliar or offers too much of a theoretical and methodological challenge for empirical and collaborative investigation. A felt connectedness to a variety of locales and in between and across organizational spaces and scales is more likely than not something a mobile and migrant worker between cultures wants and needs to come to grips with. But this does not necessarily apply to someone whose life-experience and orientation is limited to one or two locales and their micro-processes.

Because I wanted to come to terms with the social and political dynamics encountered as a Culturally and Linguistically (CaLD) migrant teacher working and studying in Australian primary, secondary and tertiary including Aboriginal schools, I started and completed a PhD study titled ‘Understanding and Working with the

Dynamics in Cross-Cultural Education. In the thesis the metaphor and cultural trope of the ‘cross’ is explored to emphasize that working in cross-cultural contexts requires attentiveness *and* communication, that is dialogue around how one is complicit in globalization and implicated in cultural pluralism and other phenomena that relate to diversity. Hence my argument for autoethnography: what happens at the centre of cross-cultural exchanges is a personal and creative responsibility and an *alive, performative* form of cross-cultural but also higher education in a globalizing world. No matter what one’s professional role or level of expertise is, cross-cultural exchanges are not some form of data transfer between fixed, unconscious, robot-like identities but part of an organising or ‘morphic’ field (Van den Akker, 2009). People are not robots but energy-beings (Ormsby-Green, 2007) that partake of morphic fields that have an intelligence of their own and develop themselves towards a particular goal (Sheldrake, 2012). Cross-cultural exchanges are fluid, interlinked, inter-subjective and *felt* experiences of spiritual beings that are not limited to the human intellect and communicate horizontally but also vertically and simultaneously across many different epistemological spaces (Van den Akker, 2009). Their inheritance is not limited to the material world, their mind is not in the brain, their memories are not stored in the material world and they are not reliant on mechanical, medical or research systems. They live in and learn lessons from a spatiotemporal world and partake of everyday life in all sorts of creative ways. In higher education organizational contexts they bring together the spiritual, the physical and the mental or ‘meaningful’ in each relationship and contribute to the colourful context of cultural pluralism and diversity.

Learning-in-action, or *Learning Inaction* as a Socio-political Activity

Especially higher education organizations that have a policy which emphasizes self-directed learning, critical and reflexive thinking, action learning and community engagement could consider science and learning as one and the same: a socio-political activity in the spirit of collaborative inquiry. This means that executive staff and others in power inside the academe cannot afford to pull rank, withdraw and hide their personality behind their expertise and truth-systems (Foucault, 1980), their professional roles and *games of culture* (Bourdieu, 1984, 1992): as *performative acts* to ensure the maintenance of their current and separate positions (Shim, 2012). They cannot afford the idea that different viewpoints are okay but only if they do not conflict with dominant viewpoints and the dominant status quo (ibid).

In Garnham’s (1993) words, the ‘dominant fraction cannot safely leave the cultural field to be shaped by interstatus group competition between subsets of dominated fraction’ (p. 189).

So what can executive staff afford?

Executive staff can afford reframing their understanding of the entire organizational field of higher education and (if only temporarily) adopt the viewpoint of ‘affordances’ as proposed by Letiche and Lissack (2001), suggesting that there is ‘no division between the observing mind and anything else’ (p. 143). Executive staff can afford seeing itself as other than passive and attend to the organization of higher education in critical examination of their personal habits and choices and how these mesh with those of the entire organization in a performative

sense. They can afford addressing the process of communication across boundaries as participants of a complex organizational field, and not only as managerial staff but also as adult educators that can help people to organize higher education not as a business of education that is systematic and static but as a culture that is a dynamic and ongoing cross-cultural process of meaning-making (Ang, 2012, p. 790) in which they themselves are included. They can afford taking a look into how political relations shape and recreate limited options for thought and action, and how emotions and politics collide in everyday management practices (Vince, 2008, p. 94). They can afford a questioning of existing ways of policy-making and wonder, for example, whether existing strategies are still fit for the global landscape of today where multiple agents interact at random without set standards of rigour, rationality and 'truth'. Executive staff can afford the idea of being drawn into a situation that is not necessarily in sync with their personal will, and shift their focus of attention to benefit the greater good. They can afford a postmodern stance and look forward to a (collectively felt) sense of excitement that comes along with being a individually and collectively *response-able* participant of a dynamic field of interaction and part of an active process of meaning-making at different levels of organization, including the systemic but also for example the worldview and discourse as well as the mythic layers. They can assume and/or promote the idea that organizational learning and organizational health are socially constructed, and self-organize not ad-hoc but towards a particular attractor: a 'fitness landscape' that changes dependent on the actions of everything else in its surroundings but also with an imagined and intended destination in mind that benefits all people regardless of their ranking in the social or professional arena. Every body makes meaning of situations by filtering new impressions through prior frames of reference. These reference frames are place-based and continuously influenced by the surrounding society's collective understandings and norms that shape policies, including those concerned with multiculturalism. Sadly, most policies to date echo out-dated thought patterns because they are *reactively* designed rather than proactively based on possible and preferred futures. Simplified versions of ethnicity and fixed ideas of distinct, monolithic cultures with divisive moralising injunctions such as 'respect difference!' and 'assimilate or else!' tend to persist in today's monoliths (Noble, 2012, as cited in Ang, 2012, p. 792).

On the way towards possible and preferred futures, executive staff may want to recognize the existence of not one but two opposite dynamics so as to address some of the oppressive forces that operate in large institutions. There is the centrifugal (outgoing) dynamic of *learning-in-action* and the centripetal (center-seeking) force of *learning inaction*. Vince (2008) stresses that these two opposing organizational dynamics show that emotions and politics interweave in organizational learning-processes (p. 94), and block or promote critical reflection in an organization but also produce and reproduce those conditions. Learning-in-action is the creative forward-moving and coevolving dynamic, whereas the learning inaction dynamic forms an opposing attractor, for example when the sponsors of a critical reflection activity do not partake of the activity themselves, or when groups of employees fail to act because conscious and unconscious knowledge, fantasies and perceptions about when it is emotionally and politically expedient to refrain from action and when to avoid collective action controls the inaction (pp. 93-97). From a 'social epistemology' point of view, *learning inaction* is a culturally determined dynamic

that is framed by those in power. It is a group mind, a ‘consensus-practice’ within epistemic communities that institutional structures guide or frame to model the ‘host’ culture as bounded, non-pathological and constant (Marginson, 2012, p. 4). It is meant to block free flowing communication and deny agency, to demand that, for example, international students [and staff] *assimilate* that is ‘fit in’ with the traits and the required set of (English and ‘academic’) language skills. It is also meant to break down the home country identity because this identity is seen as an obstacle (ibid). In my PhD-study one of my research participants - who is a holistically oriented change manager – referred to this dynamic as *resistance* which, in her words ‘is a typical response to a disruption of expectations. I.e. every time a belief, tradition, behavior, rule or taboo is ‘violated’ (expectation not met) it is likely to create a disruption in the communication flow... or it can cause a complete breakdown of the communication.’

By disregarding the *inaction* dynamic of an organization, the people who make the organization remain *uncritical* in a performative sense, continuously trying to cope with internal conflicts and contradictions (Vince, 2008, p. 95) whilst remaining trapped in a powerful though outdated grand narrative with simplistic and rigid stereotyped references to minority groups in society. The dialogical multicultural self of the global nomad can offer a powerful counter-narrative provided it is given a voice. Being used to living on the contact zones of cultures and intimately knowing the complexity of those zones, the global nomad is able to produce safe spaces for dialogue on issues such as diversity in higher education organizations. With changes in society at large with vertical structures and grand narratives increasingly breaking down, the intensification of global communications and mobility and the increased quality and quantity level of interactions between multiple identities across national borders needs to be matched culturally (Konig, 2012). Janssens and Steyaert (2001, as cited in Konig, 2012, p. 185) challenge those in power to create safe spaces where employees of different cultures can focus on standing strongly whilst ‘becoming’ more of their hybrid identity or multiciplicit self and perhaps grow into a culture broker or multicultural leader. In higher education organizations, the global nomad then is a force to be invited in and reckoned with, not silenced or ignored. Staff and students from overseas who have lived in different places are anything but in deficit educationally, socially or culturally. These people fully understand the complexity of hybrid identities and are capable of managing complex personal and professional changes, reflective of their commitment to self-formation (Marginson, 2012) and of ‘learning-in-action’. The global nomad is most equipped to help transform a centripetal consensus-practice and help others embrace the proactive power of people’s agency. They are enablers for ‘learning-in-action’ and a means for overcoming the fixation on the separation of ‘Aboriginal’ ideologies, issues and policies from ‘migrant’ ones (Stephenson, 2003; 2012, p. 62). As Dimitrov (2005a) argues, everyone who works in a complex organization needs to deal with critical states, which in complexity theory means the point at which something triggers a change in the basic nature or character of an object or group. ‘It is at this point that the practitioner is tested, not in the stead state of affairs’ (pp. 129-130). Global nomads are used to negotiating and living with instabilities and more or less forced to live at the edge of chaos: between order and chaos. They are therefore well equipped to work as facilitators of critical action learning processes, as demonstrated in the following interaction between an Indigenous research-participant and myself

as a PhD researcher:

Jose: Did you enjoy looking, working on those questions?

Ros: It is funny. When you first asked me I thought: How can I fit into that? You know, that's got nothing to do with me! When you sent me the questions, I thought: These questions are not relevant to me. And then I started to think a little bit more, and... when you sent me the second lot of questions I started to see the connections. That's why, if you think of my first lot of responses... that second lot, your understanding more and my understanding has come a bit more. It's like digging into the ground and the hole is getting a bit bigger and you'll know what it is all about... In the beginning I could not understand... the honesty is that I often I cannot see the... being on the margin I cannot see the parallel to anything other... a lot of the time I feel very separate to the main. And when I see anything more, anything in general, I cannot see a connection. But yours... I am starting to build the connection, because if I cannot see the connections, I cannot see the significance. And now the connection... it is there. It is still a bit weird. But... yeah yeah...

Jose: If you would draw what you were just saying, what would that look like? I have some paper here... What would that look like? And that might sort of automatically lead to what you're saying here too, so let's just go with what happens.

Ros: Yeah... So what do you want me to draw? How...

Jose: Just what that looks like. I am very visually oriented and I need... haha... to see sometimes what other people see, also for my own awareness and understanding, of how you saw at first and started to see the connection, how has that progressed, visually. So I would like to see how you made the connections. If you draw out, when you look at the other and how that feels like, or looks like, or feels like... I don't know how you are oriented... you know, depending on how you sensate. Do you know what I mean?

Ros: This is what I feel. This is my cross. This is where I see myself. This is the window. The window is always ever going to be there.

Jose: Ahhh...

Ros: The window is always ever going to be there. But there is where I am. That's me on the sill.

Jose: On the window-sill that is, aye.

Ros: Yeah. To me the window is society. And we are in there but

no-one can see us.

Jose: Ahhh, I see.

Ros: Can you understand? That's my cross. The window is the thing that is tangible... as wood, as concrete, as whatever the window is, on the big building. But here is the spirit of me, the spirit of my people. We are part of the window but... we can disappear and come... my people and other people who are marginalised, we are here... The window is there... And we make up... we are part of that window, like it or not.

Challenging either/or thinking and the contact hypothesis

Either/or thinking (as other to both/and thinking) shapes a pathway that *seems* to run counter to the capacity to address issues related to increased numbers of international *students* and the Australian Government's social inclusion agenda that responds to recommendations of the Bradley Report (Bradley et al, 2008) and the Martin Report (Martin, 1994). It also *seems* to run counter to the need for those in power inside higher education organizations to play an 'ethical role' in the global context of cultural pluralism and diversity (UNESCO, 1998) and the recently released White Paper of the Australian government (2012) titled 'Australia in the Asian century', which expresses commitment to the 'transformational agenda for Australia's engagement with the [Asian] region' (p. 252).

But either/or thinking and the social inclusion agenda actually co-constitute each other. As Muller (2011) found out, designers of multicultural projects tend to place a simplistic kind of faith in social projects that are meant to stimulate contact between members of different ethnic groups, but under 'optimal conditions'. He found that the implementation of those projects did not contribute to social change, because in practice the dominant discourse prevailed. Superficial differences ('color', 'where you are born', 'where you lived') continue to be emphasized juxtaposed with ideas around equality and sameness, but without a deep regard for real and consequential differences between different groups of people (p. 434). Muller argues there is a 'contact hypothesis' in play that ensures that the commitment to in-group privilege continues to coexist with superficial positive attitudes about certain aspects of subordinate groups (p. 428). For example, one might glorify one type of 'royal other' but actively excommunicate another 'lesser' other.

It makes sense then to question existing practices and the premises upon which they are built. It makes sense to unpack the significance of maintaining a giant machine with little cogs that needs to be adjusted at times in order for it to adapt to the demands of a robotic society. This unpacking is all the more pertinent in light of UNESCO's (1998) 'dictate' that higher education organizations have an 'ethical role' in society, especially in the global context of cultural pluralism and diversity.

Reflecting on the ethical role of higher education, and policy processes

UNESCO (1998) dictates that those in power of higher education organizations consider an 'ethical role'. This ethical role is explained as follows:

a/ 'to enable staff and students to a/ preserve the exercise of ethics and scientific and intellectual rigour; b/ speak out on ethical, cultural and social problems completely independently and in full awareness of their responsibilities, exercising a kind of intellectual authority that society needs to help it to reflect, understand and act; c/ enhance their critical and forward-looking functions, through continuing analysis of emerging social, economic, cultural and political trends, providing a focus for forecasting, warning and prevention; d) exercise their intellectual capacity and their moral prestige to defend and actively disseminate universally accepted values, including peace, justice, freedom, equality and solidarity, as enshrined in UNESCO's Constitution; e/ enjoy full academic autonomy and freedom, conceived as a set of rights and duties, while being fully responsible and accountable to society; and f/ play a role in helping identify and address issues that affect the well-being of communities, nations and global society' (ibid).

The UNESCO dictate states that having an ethical role means that 'due attention should be paid to specific institutional, national and regional contexts in order to take into account diversity and to avoid uniformity' (ibid). But it is not clear why it is believed to be important for higher education organizations to have this particular 'ethical role'. The paradigm (worldview) and discourse, the myths and metaphors that underpin the idea of 'paying due attention' are not stated, and it is not clear who or what is to 'pay due attention'. If UNESCO places the onus on the 'system' of policy makers it does not offer an ethical or conceptual framework that those policy makers 'should' abide by. There is not even a discussion on the conceptualization of policy systems, which is a gap Morçöl (2012) addresses by arguing that an unquestioned and usually simplistic view on policy processes limits people's capacity for understanding and working with human dynamics and integrating problems of micro-macro or agency-structure relations into policy processes (pp. 1-9). He refers to Gerrits' (2008, as cited on p. 274)) dichotomous conceptualization for understanding policy systems:

'Gerrits' study indicates that singular policy systems try to maintain their structural stability by selecting participants that 'buy into' the pre-established self-image of the system, which is set by the leadership. They keep the members who support the pre-established views of leadership and ignore and/or exclude those who have different views, whereas composite policy actions systems are open to differing views and dissent and they are more dynamic in the sense that they change their structures to adapt to external events. In Gerrits' view composite policy systems are more effective compared to singular systems' (Morçöl (2012, p. 274).

Arguably, public policy systems and their processes are not simplistic, linear, mechanical devices since the reality of the world today is complex and dynamic. Though for many thousands of years people lived in relatively small communities

and stable environments, the world today is a very different place and complex (pp. 6-7). Policy systems now are emergent, self-organizational, and dynamic complex system and the relations among the actors are as nonlinear and coevolutionary (p. 9) as there are interdependent human agents (actors) involved that self-organize and are situated across time and space, each observing the world around them according to a priori cognitive schemata and conceptual frameworks (p. 17). Higher education organizations as collectives of people operate in a very different public because globalizing space, and a social network analysis would be useful to determine to what extent their policy systems are self-organizing, dynamic and related to other systems. With that, a complexity theory perspective could offer a refreshing contribution to a discussion on 'singular policy action system' approaches and how to better guide higher education organizations toward a more general adoption of a more culturally sensitive approach. Without such a discussion, socio-cultural 'silos' inside higher education organizations will continue to exacerbate the unsafe space between 'foreigners' and 'locals' (Konig, 2012; Vandermensbrugghe, 2011). Those in control will continue to see migrants and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) staff and students as a valuable 'commodity' that Australians need to acknowledge (Vandermensbrugghe, 2011), and reinforce a racist discourse that reflects the mechanistic worldview and justifies the silencing of for example migrants' voices who already face considerable challenges and have a 'hurting sensitivity as experts of uneasiness' (Minnini, Manuti, Scardigno & Rubino, 2010, p. 395).

Reflecting-on-the-future

UNESCO's article 6 states that a long term orientation is based on relevance, and article 9 emphasizes innovative educational approaches, that is critical thinking and creativity. These statements may be meant to help create an organizational reality that not only reflects on the 'past' and its deficit models but also on the preferred futures to demonstrate a commitment to engage in action learning to transcend the limitations of the human condition (Slater, 2009). But without an eye for reflecting-on-the-future by considering or imagining various possibilities and the strategies which are required to achieve them (Wilson, 2008), Australian higher education cannot propel itself into another and more progressive direction. Without foresight there is no impetus to *unpack* tacit, token or taken-for-granted views of the future (Gough, 1990), and how to go about social restructuring from a state-centric world to a multicentric one. And without such an impetus, the type of thinking typical of 'closed' systems¹ will stay intact and with that the justification of exploitation.

In summary, it is important for both UNESCO and (Australian) higher education organizations as collectives of people to challenge their current positions - including their views on policy systems - and at least consider themselves as organic sets of complex, non-linear interactive processes as different to being representatives of 'truth-systems' within set structures. It is also important to challenge their view on *cross-cultural exchanges* that are life-giving and creative processes (Van den Akker, 2009, 2010). Cross-cultural exchanges are a personal and creative responsibility and an *alive, performative* part of an organizing or 'morphic' field, and a valuable contribution to scenario-building projects that explore new frontiers in building capacity for change. Values based learning lies at the core of this activity, and

process-learning as a crucial component of *currere* (Eisner, 1979): designing the course collaboratively whilst ‘walking’ towards what is imagined as a diversity of peoples. This implies a process of re/discovery, of ‘trailing a new path’ in acceptance of the *circulating spirit of multiculturalism* (Hodge & O’Carroll, 2006, pp. 190-191) where people’s contacts, flows and energies interact and act out as interfaces to move forward as a whole humanity. It implies a willingness but also action to work with the local environment with a global vision in mind. It implies the creation of possibilities for all people that partake of its learning community, so they can use a maximum diversity of relationships with individuals and groups of people. It implies awareness of the fact that human beings are self-determined but also influenced by their natural environment including cosmic forces and planetary cycles (Akademie voor Expressie en Kommunikatie, 1972; Dimitrov, n.d.-a)². It further implies actively and *intently* including people from diverse backgrounds – not as a must-do and ‘control’ activity because UNESCO dictates something – but as a process of sheer joy as an essential and necessary part of learning to walk together in integrity.

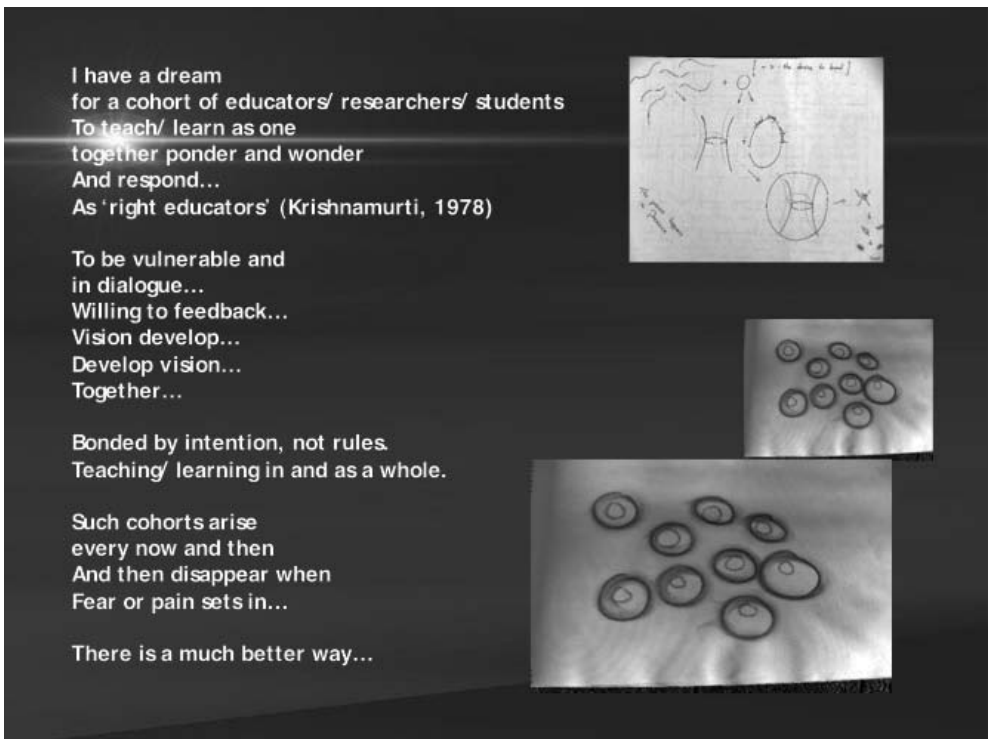


Figure 1. ‘I have a dream’ (cited from my creative PhD journal)

Case Study: Learning collectively as an alternative practice of scholarship

The Academy for Expression & Communication (AVEK) at which I was a full-time student from 1982-1986 was an officially recognised and government funded teacher-training college in the Netherlands that existed from 1972 to 1988. It was

formally constituted as a *cooperative* and consisted of about two hundred and twenty (220) members. We referred to this cooperative as a ‘learning collective’ that aimed to ‘deliver’ teachers in ‘Expression & Communication’ (E&C). E&C ‘is the area that involves the magnetic and electric processes of exchanging information that want expression and reception’ (Akademie voor Expressie en Kommunikatie information sheet, 1972). The AVEK was autopoietic, that is ‘open to diverse external and internal forces that, in combination, gave birth to chaotic dynamics that were reproduced and evolved and shaped themselves in a vital structural coupling with the ever changing dynamics of the environment’ (Dimitrov & Fell, n.d.). The idea was that life offers challenges that are to be understood and worked with, not avoided or ignored. This meant in practice that we facilitated each other’s learning process as developing teachers in E&C and were in constant interaction with the world ‘outside’. Every member of the organisation was formally responsible for offering a maximum amount of learning possibilities for individuals and the collective as a whole to fulfil their potential as a teacher in Expression & Communication. The organisation was therefore structured so that every person but also the collective as a whole had access to a maximum diversity of relationships. Students, lecturers, general staff and other members of society helped realize the aims of the academy as a whole, assuming the principle that it does not matter with whom people work but *what* it is that people want to realize (Akademie voor Expressie en Kommunikatie, 1972, p. 19).

Each student and lecturer formed part of one of the four learning units. My unit consisted of 64 members. All four units held weekly meetings to discuss any matters that any of the members wanted to explore and—to some degree—resolve. New initiatives were taken but any proposed action was brought to the general vote, no matter whether they involved people’s personal or collective learning. If any member of the collective would oppose the decision, the action would not be taken. The issue would then be explored more in-depth so as to better understand the different dynamics in play.

Twice a year we evaluated and reassessed each person’s learning process and where one was ‘located’ in terms of his/her development as a teacher in E&C. We also evaluated and reassessed the development of our learning unit. This combined process took a whole week. Afterwards we evaluated and reassessed the learning process of the academy as a whole: a process that also took a whole week. To assist the process we made use of the Learning Plan’s diagrams that described the dynamics involved with each learning phase. We also used the six (6) criteria which we saw as fluid, dynamic principles: self-awareness, cooperation, coming from life-experience and -knowledge, equal validation, developing self and environment, and utilizing Expression & Communication media. At the end of the two weeks of assessment and evaluation, each person designed and planned to implement projects to help realise one’s personal and collective’s aims for the next semester.

Learning was seen as a progressive but also cyclic development, and we identified 14 learning phases: seven that applied to students and seven to teachers/lecturers. The seven student-phases were: 1/ orientation and selection (outward focused), 2/ researching one’s own values and norms (inward focused), 3/ giving structure (outward focused), 4/ exploring one’s own mechanisms (inward focused), 5/ giving structure (outward focused), 6/ repetition (inward and outward focused at the same time), and 7/ re/orientation and selection (as a graduate). We assumed that

implies the act of engaging in and as such encourage an interactive and mutually constitutive process of learning that includes ‘intensive questioning, contemplating and meditating how everyone in the organisation is both ‘product’ of social self-organisation and an active actor affecting it’ (ibid). It is about working with the constructs that people embody as something that is *dynamic*, that is, able to be changed and to evolve.

Implications for Australian higher education

In addition to individual learning, the process of collective learning looks like an appropriate avenue for scholarly evolution in the context of cultural pluralism and diversity. This does not mean that it is necessary for those formally responsible for managing learning organizations to abolish the idea of a vertical hierarchy with a director, administrators, teachers and students. At the AVEK we used this formal type of structure but only for *formal* occasions to communicate effectively with others. But informally, in *daily practice* and *internally* we all worked as members of a learning organisation with the *tension* between the three roles of self as an individual, self as a members of the collective and self as a member of society. Assuming these three roles and the willingness to work with the tension between them proved to allow for more space for expression, communication and negotiation of a range of personal and group dynamics whilst ‘tinkering at the edges’ of colonizing structures that implicate our identities.

In an attempt to move beyond strategy and towards transformation with a preferred vision of higher education, it is useful for those currently responsible for the futures of Australian higher education organizations to inquire into and reflect on alternative scenarios and the journeys that organizations such as - and not limited to - Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and the Academy for Expression and Communication (AVEK) undertook. As collectives they may employ heuristic research and enter into a process of going six stages of inquiry (Moustakas, 1990): 1/ the *initial engagement* stage, which implies ‘scanning’ and feeling one’s way into another physical, social and psychic landscape and allowing many questions to arise in one’s mind; 2/ the *immersion stage* when living the questions in waking, sleeping, and even dreaming states for several months, when everything seems to crystallize around one’s questions. It may involve family and friends in the questioning and seeking answers as one goes along; 3/ the *incubation stage*, when “the researcher retreats from the intense, concentrated focus on the question” (p. 28) and ‘allows the inner workings of the tacit dimension and intuition to continue to clarify and extend understanding on levels outside the immediate awareness’ (p. 29); 4/ the stage of *illumination* assisted by for example exercise and meditation to free the mind from ‘fixed’ thinking and emotional turmoil attached to ‘outdated’ professional roles and how the body and mind are ‘bracketed’ from meta-thinking by political structures and its social epistemology; 5/ the *explication* stage when things start to ‘make sense’ and 6/ the *creative synthesis stage* when content and structures grow organically and in alignment into existence.

The process of heuristic research would be enhanced by actively including staff and students and especially people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds. It would demonstrate recognition of the fact that every person is complicit in globalization and a social epistemology that is both linearly and nonlinearly responsible for the health and wellbeing of humanity as a whole and as

an interconnected entity.

Conclusion

This article articulated some of my own experiences as a member of a learning organization. Here, teacher training meant going through a series of learning-cycles. It also offered a critique of the current model of higher education and the ways in which it is currently organized, at least in Australia. It suggested a way forward for Australian Higher Education institutions, challenging it to take a deeper look into UNESCO's ethical injunction. The article finished with the suggestion to engage into a process of inquiry into and reflection on journeys that other higher education organizations as collectives of people have undertaken. This process may involve heuristic research, enhanced by including staff and students from inside but also outside existing organizations, and especially global nomads and people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds.

It needs reiterating that though those in charge of higher education organizations in Australia do endorse a strict code of ethics, these ethics are usually based on and conform to neoclassical economics, managerialism and consumerism, and derived from either/or thinking. This type of thinking necessarily demands exclusivity, warranting the fantasy that the dynamics of a system tend toward stasis or equilibrium and that it is necessary to keep only those members that support the pre-established views of current leadership, thus ignore or get rid of those who have differing views. But as complexity theory demonstrates, systems' dynamics are self-organizing and emergent, and those in charge need to be able to work with unpredictable dynamics at the edge of chaos. Systems' dynamics tend to co-evolve toward far-from-equilibrium conditions, perhaps because they are based on an ethics of co-creativity and autopoiesis.

Clearly a much more comprehensive and wide-spread discussion is needed on this topic, especially if those in power of Australian higher education organizations are keen to shift their focus towards addressing the nonlinear complexity of the world, away from simple and linear definitions of well-being and organizational health, and away from placing importance on personal or group-status. The suggested pathways proposed in this article - critical action learning which implies acknowledgement of the two dynamics of learning-in-action and learning inaction, reflecting-on-the-future, collaboratively reflecting on probable, possible and preferable futures of higher education, and - may seem rather far-fetched. But at the same time the use of new technologies such as Massive Open Online Courses or MOOC's already challenge existing definitions and limitations in activities such as teaching, learning, curriculum-development, and educational relationships. The diversity of voices in different educational landscapes offers massive potential for collective learning and an appropriate avenue for scholarly evolution beyond the subjective ethical interface. After all, each of us is complicit in globalization and a social epistemology that is both linearly and nonlinearly responsible for the health and wellbeing of humanity as a whole and as an interconnected entity. If only in the pursuit of a dream...

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Notes

- 1 In their book titled 'Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change', Beck and Cowan (2006) refer to open, arrested and closed MEME systems. Whilst Open Systems demonstrate potential for more complex level functioning, Arrested Systems are caught by barriers in self/situation and Closed Systems blocked by biopsychosocial capacities (p. 77).
- 2 Dimitrov (n.d.-a) introduced the concept of Integrated Ecological Space (IES) in 1998: 'every living entity represents a network of mutually connected 'agents' - interdependent constituents - which constantly interact with one another and with the environment to ensure entities survive and evolve. The networks of living entities are not separated, but build an all-embracing dynamic web of relationships that covers the whole existential space.

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