

Chapter 10

Conclusion

The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest of life, by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning. The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively. At least, this is the function which it should perform for society. A university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence. This atmosphere of excitement, arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energising as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes. Youth is imaginative, and if imagination be strengthened by discipline this energy of imagination can in great measure be preserved through life. ...Fools act on imagination without knowledge; pedants act on knowledge without imagination. The task of a university is to weld together imagination and experience. (Whitehead, 1967, p. 93, *The Aims of Education*, written in 1929)

Agile PBL, within an agile PBL ecology for learning, is about humanising higher education through imaginative approaches to student learning, to teaching, to curriculum, to assessment, to professional learning, to interdisciplinary approaches that go well beyond the institutional walls, to student development and support, to curriculum sustainability, to research and the scholarship of teaching and learning, and to administration and leadership. Throughout this book, agile PBL has taken the idea of a human ecology seriously. In other words, an agile PBL curriculum is not contained in a discipline or a course, but instead is influenced by and affects the wider society. This, in turn, means that it affects others in various environments of the university and therefore should be the concern of all parts and layers of the university and beyond. In other words, all four systems in the agile PBL ecology for learning we have presented here affect each other, and so they should. Agile PBL then is about reinvigorating university education and blurring rigid siloed boundaries. There is no one person, nor the teacher, who is responsible for educating students. Rather, it is everyone's responsibility, including the students, employers and wider social networks inside and outside the university. Agile PBL is about welding together imagination and experience in potentially every layer of society; it is thus

about making connections, rather than erecting barriers. Again, ecosystems – people and environments – do not exist in isolation, but are rather interdependent, and they interact with each other. When all elements connect, ‘magic’ can happen, or what we have with Barnett (2013) referred to as a ‘feasible utopia’. However, ecologies are potentially also fragile, especially if different systems within it are competing, rather than complementing each other. We have imagined here that students who move out of an agile PBL university or ecology for learning will have the ability to think, feel and act on the connections between the four systems in the ecology, and they will be able to move freely between them. In this way they may become Whitehead’s (1967) ‘poets of our dreams and the architects of our purposes’, confident in their abilities to unlock and apply their imagination.

The recurring theme in Whitehead’s statement above is imagination, and this is not coincidentally also the underlying ‘dreaming’ about an agile PBL ecology for learning, or the imagining of this ‘feasible utopia’. Imagination in teaching is not just about imparting content and knowledge, but also about unlocking the human qualities and potential of education. Agile PBL is about continuous renewal, rather than a one-off project, and this requires delving deep into our inherent human imagination. Sir Ken Robinson (2006) has convincingly argued that education kills our creativity and imagination, but this is not a foregone conclusion; we can change this. Agile PBL is about reinserting imagination into the universities. Imagination is about continuous renewal, experimentation, reinventions, exploration, adaptation, creation and all of this in contexts that are relevant to those engaged in the process. It is not about maintaining the status quo, but about continuously questioning and rethinking the status quo. It is about imagining what a better future would look like and then taking control over that future, through imagination, rigorous dedication and humility – a ‘feasible utopia’ (Barnett, 2013). None of this is easy to achieve, as many universities are characterised by structures and boundaries that have seemingly been in place for a long time. However, if we choose the alternative, then we will wake up one day and the bottom will have fallen out, and the whole enterprise will have become largely irrelevant.

University structures are often concerned with clarity and clear boundaries around who does what, which is epitomised in disciplinary thinking. In reality, however, a university’s ecology is not quite as neatly organised and involves a number of interacting ecologies which are part of a student’s learning. In other words, the micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems are messy and porous, and we see a continuous blurring of boundaries between personal and academic learning and lives – work and study, personal and professional relationships, family, community and society. All of these are always already connected and interrelated and therefore impact on each other. It’s just that these relationships are neatly and artificially separated in many universities. Agile provision in the university has ‘the potential to enhance student learning, widen opportunities for participation in higher education, and develop graduates who are well-equipped to contribute to a fast-changing world’ (Barnett, 2014, p. 10). An agile PBL takes these connections seriously and therefore infuses them into the relevant contexts in its overall ecology for learning.

In this book we have repeatedly discussed the links between the university and society. Again, this is about Whitehead's (1967) challenge for universities to be 'welding together imagination and experience'. The human dimensions of an agile PBL ecology for learning never stand still, but rather adapt continuously to ever changing circumstances and contexts. Moreover, agile PBL has a future-oriented focus, in that it is forever concerned with continuous improvement, not just of the curriculum, but of society itself on a global level. On a student level, the expected outcomes of the process are clear: graduates who are not afraid to think about solutions to current or future problems; graduates who are comfortable with change and indeed thrive in dynamic environments; graduates who feel a sense of responsibility as global citizens, rather than a singular focus on their own wealth accumulation; and graduates who are not constrained by the boundaries of their current position, but who are always looking out for better ways of doing things. In the immortal words of John Lennon, you may say we are dreamers, but we would argue that agile PBL is about creating an educational environment where dreaming is encouraged (the utopia part), as long as it is followed up by tangible and evidence-based solutions (the feasible part). In short, it is about injecting rigour into imagination.

An agile PBL ecology for learning is about humanising higher education. It is about integration and interconnectedness; it is about reciprocity and shared responsibility; it is about respect and collaboration, rather than about individual achievement; it is about fluidity and flexibility, between systems and within systems, rather than about rigid and inflexible boundaries. It is the combination of knowledges, skills, confidence and humility in the ability to be unafraid of the complex and uncertain world, for students, staff and other significant people in the university, as well as for employers and other relevant persons beyond the university. In doing so, we hope our imagining of an agile PBL ecology for learning, inspired by Bronfenbrenner's human ecology development model, can in some way inch towards a new awakening for higher education in improving 'the course of human life at the levels of both individual and their social world' (Lerner, 2005, p. xix).

References

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