ENTERPRISE AND THE HUMANITIES

Dan Fleming*

Universities in the UK are being pulled, pushed, threatened, bullied and seduced into joining what is being called a 'national framework for education and training'. The pieces of this framework are almost all in place: the National Curriculum, the National Vocational Qualifications, definitions of so-called Core Skills – all that remains is for the universities to slide into position. Many of the ex-polytechnics are already in place (as a result of a more vocational ethos or a less defensively traditional community of scholars), which makes the abolition of the binary divide a very neat trick – resistant universities will be left out in the cold suffering a kind of identity crisis. The magic material with which this bold and brazen new edifice has been constructed is the notion of 'competence'.

Competence – whose definition?

This isn't the place to rehearse the history and explanations of what has become a competence 'movement' in the UK (it has a lot to do with the Manpower Services Commission which became the Training Commission which became the Training

* Lecturer in English, Media and Theatre Studies, University of Ulster at Coleraine.
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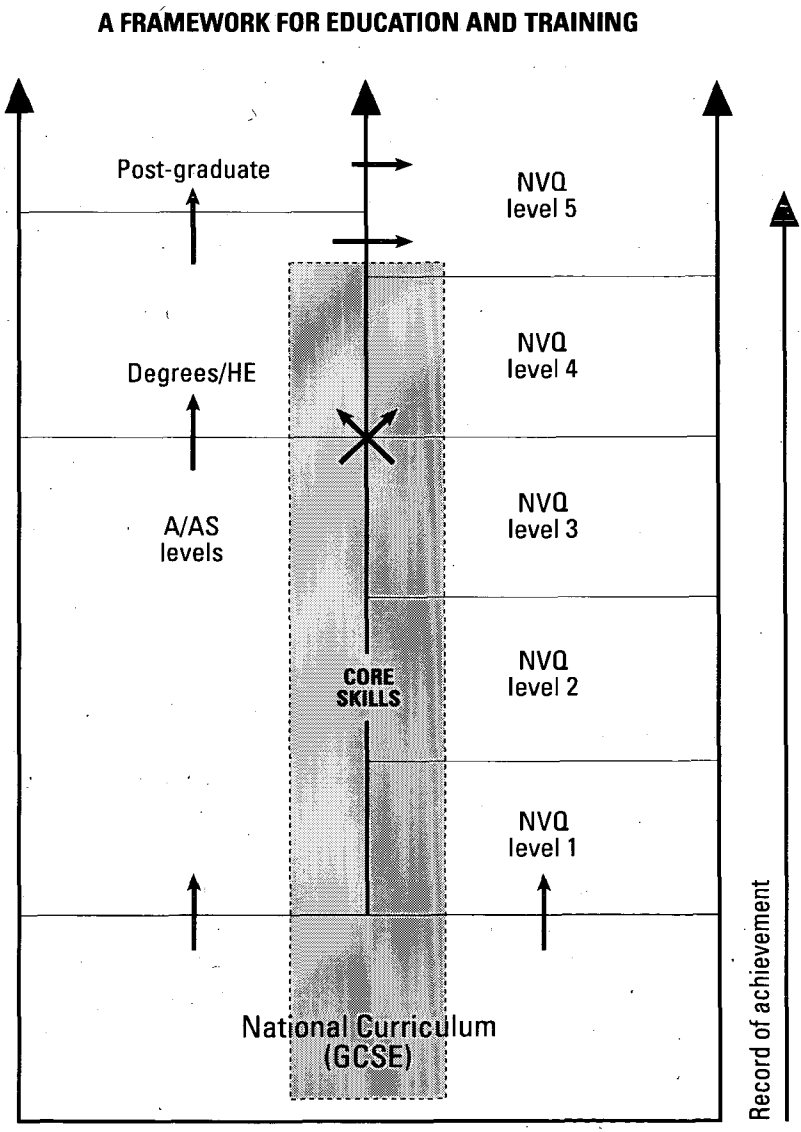
Agency which then strategically 'disappeared' into streamlined units like the Standards Methodology Branch of the Department of Employment, serviced by influential private consultants such as BSD Ltd.). The main point of competence-based developments has been the drive to specify, in the most explicit terms possible, what it is that makes people competent. In fact in many ways that probably isn't a bad thing, given the woeful state of our knowledge about what makes someone really good at anything (we tend to fall back on notions such as 'having the knack'). But the engine driving the competence movement along has been the vocational side of the national framework. The other side, the academic side of schooling (i.e. A-Levels, Leaving Certificate) and Higher Education, has tended to free wheel on the accumulated momentum of decades of doing the same thing. We (on what we have thought was the non-vocational side) are finding, however, that we have been hitched to the vocational engine when we weren't looking and our direction has changed. We need, as a matter of urgency, to think about how our definitions of competence differ from those being enshrined in the new framework.

The best way to understand the latter, without a lengthy discussion of all its subtleties (for it is subtle and we mustn't make the mistake of assuming that it is a half-baked and philistine assemblage of bad thinking), is to take one very specific example from the clearly vocational side. This will exemplify the whole model.

The example comes from the steel industry. First a 'key purpose' is identified, giving us the starting point for our example – 'supply a range of iron and steel products by processing raw materials, to meet anticipated and actual market demands' (BSD Ltd., 1989). This purpose is subdivided several times to cover, for example, the obtaining of raw materials, the manufacturing process and delivery to users. Each subdivision is further divided – so manufacturing takes us to hot working, cold working and casting. Following each further we find that 'key work roles' are then identified. So cold working gets subdivided into three roles; for the purpose of the example we will follow one – 'manufacture strip materials by cold rolling processes'. This work role is then analysed into 'units of competence', in this case four from which we will follow one – 'cold roll materials to specification'. The latter then branches into 'elements of competence', in this case five and again we will follow only one – 'calibrate cold rolling equipment to process materials to specification'. This element of competence, like the other fourteen which have been reached at this level of analysis, is then broken down into a list of performance

Figure 1: A Framework for Education and Training



criteria, statements of the 'range' or scope of each criterion (e.g. variation in types of equipment) and a description of the evidence that will be looked for from a trainee to indicate competence. So one performance criterion will be 'the machine is isolated from the power source before calibration begins' and, as evidence, a checklist will be ticked every time a trainee pulls out the plug. This comprehensive description, which moves from a national purpose to a trainee pulling a plug, is typical of how competence has been analysed for, to date, some 80% of UK occupations.

The example above gives us a fairly good idea of how 'competence' is being defined and assessed on the vocational side of the framework and there is a distinct similarity with the operation of the National Curriculum in schools where extensive lists of Attainment Targets have been introduced. The Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative is one channel through which this approach is being introduced into Higher Education, but via the buffer zone of the so-called core skills. Figure 1 (from Jessup, 1991, p.86) makes this especially clear. That top left corner of the shaded 'core skills' zone is where the Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative has its base and its forays out into the tricky area of degree-level teaching and sensitive academic communities are designed largely to find ways of binding the latter into the overall framework. The 'Enterprise competences' identified in the EHE programmes of most institutions are versions of the core skills that are intended to run right up through the heart of the entire framework.

The most common categorisation of core skills uses five divisions (with a sixth, competence in a second European language, currently being debated): (1) problem solving; (2) communication; (3) personal skills (or personal autonomy in some versions); (4) numeracy; and (5) information technology. There are people right now busily developing each of these areas into elements of competence and performance criteria. Again one example will suffice. A 1990 research and development report from the National Council for Vocational Qualifications attempted to take personal autonomy as a unit of competence (the equivalent of cold-rolling steel?) and analyse it into elements (equivalent to calibrating cold rolling equipment etc.?) such as the identification of personal strengths and weaknesses: see Figure 2 'An Example of a Core Skill Element in Personal Autonomy' (Jessup, p.84). Even a cursory glance at this example is enough to reveal its affinity with the steel industry example already quoted. Instead of the learner pulling a plug from a socket she will set herself a realistic and achievable

target for self development. A bit vaguer perhaps but the idea is the same.

Once a way of handling definitions of competence has become firmly entrenched, as it has, there is an inevitable tendency to keep on applying it. The momentum built up behind this way of thinking about what competence is will carry it through the core skills zone of the national framework and, one suspects, into the conduit represented by the EHE Initiative from where it will emerge within the universities. Given current pressures for 'modular' structures in the UK universities (to provide more flexibility of response to demand) neat box-like specifications of competence may be appealing to many. One can imagine the argument being made that whole courses could and should be assembled out of such 'modular' elements of competence.

Now the point I want to make is that this could happen and in precisely the way described, unless we come up with our own better understandings of competence. In the humanities, as elsewhere in the universities, we have to start thinking about whether the performance criteria of Fig.2, and all the other checklists that will join them, have really very much to do with what we value in our students. My contention is that the EHE Initiative and the notion of 'enterprise' can be made into an arena for debating this, rather than a conduit for introducing the results of someone else's debate. But we have to start being clearer than we have been in the past about what we do. If our intuitive response to the idea that the learner's personal autonomy can be analysed into eight performance criteria is to fear that the integrity of what good learners do is threatened rather than supported by that, then we need to be able to say more than perhaps we can at the moment about the nature of such integrity. The particular concern here is with the broad domain of the humanities.

The humanities – a sane synthesis?

Wisdom, science, knowledge, information, data – at what point on that scale does 'enterprise' make its (to some) seemingly vulgar intervention? It doesn't appear to sit too easily beside 'wisdom', being somewhat ignoble, surely a term of commerce rather than of enlightened communion? Nor does it look less uneasy beside 'science', suggesting as it does the commercial application of the latter rather than pure investigation for its own sake, for ours and for the planet's (as opposed to more simply for the sake of the market). At the other end of the scale, a conjunction of 'data' and 'enterprise' suggests only market research and consumer 'targeting' in

Figure 2: An Example of a Core Skill Element in Personal Autonomy

Element

Identify personal strengths and weaknesses and set targets for self-development in a range of applications and contexts.

Performance Criteria

- An appropriate and relevant domain or range of domains in which strengths and weaknesses are to be identified is chosen
- An appropriate and relevant range of evaluation and decision making framework for the identification of strengths and weaknesses is identified and accessed.
- An appropriate and sufficient amount of relevant personal data is collected and made available.
- Specific, valid and reliable personal data is accurately and honestly matched against significant criteria from the appropriate evaluation frame.
- Realistic and justifiable assessments are made of specific strengths and weaknesses within the criteria specified by the chosen frame.
- Strengths and weaknesses are assessed accurately within the limitation of the evaluation instruments) and are clearly prioritised for future action.
- Strengths and weaknesses which do not meet realistic requirements in the appropriate domain are targeted for development plans.
- Realistic and achievable targets are set for self-development in areas which do not meet realistic requirements to agreed and realistic timescales.

Range of Variables to which the element applies:

- As a learner, in interpersonal relations with fellow students or colleagues.
- As an employee or prospective employee.
- Intellectual, personal, physical.

Source: NCVQ R&D Report No. 6, Common Learning Outcomes: Core Skills in A/AS levels and NVQs, Jessup, 1990.

its new, computerised and demographically totalitarian guise. So we are left with the possibility that 'enterprise' makes itself felt, as both a term and an educational 'initiative', where information is turned into knowledge. The university is one of the places where this transformation occurs, for both individual learners and communities of scholars. The plural emphasis on the university as more than one community is deliberate and leads naturally to the question of what the humanities are distinctively about; something we need to agree on before any sensible discussion can take place about how best, if at all, to integrate 'enterprise' within the humanities curriculum.

If knowledge is ordered facts (systematically tested where appropriate by science and discriminated among, hierarchically and morally, by wisdom when it makes its rare appearances) then the university's communities may be distinguished one from the other by how they impose their own distinctive orders on facts. The divisions are not all that clear (natural philosophy can still mean physics in a Scottish university) and their history tangled (medieval mathematics was a liberal art), but we all tend now to accept that at least four communities co-exist in our universities: the natural sciences, the social sciences, the technologies and the humanities. Within the latter, English Studies is for the most part a twentieth century development and History a nineteenth – so the deep roots of what we call the humanities have more to do with the bedrock of post-Renaissance philosophy (setting aside its inclusion of physics) and with the classics. Each of these brought its own subtle and evolving contribution to a distinctive way of ordering facts, but only the most schematic of descriptions is possible here.

When philosophy freed itself from theology the first tenet of the humanities emerged: facts are ordered by the power of the questioning human mind, not by pre-ordained systems of belief. When the classics established their claim to preserve the high culture of the past they established also the second tenet of the humanities: that the products of the human mind constitute a culture, and cultures need to receive attention in turn if those of the past are genuinely and helpfully to inform the creation of authentic cultures in the present. Both central tenets are open to abuse. The human mind can produce bad cultures, destroy millions of people, debase lives, impoverish and enslave imaginations. The notion of preserving the best of past cultures can outweigh a commitment to making living cultures now, and elitism close minds to popular cultures. But the point remains that the humanities are where these matters receive sustained and informed attention and are passionately argued over.

Of course, the social sciences claim their say on these matters, and rightly so, but they do so as elaborate systems of ideas assembled out of research and evidence on which the individual social scientist is entirely dependent; whereas in the humanities we might usefully evoke Michael Oakeshott's reminder that 'there is no book which is indispensable for the study of philosophy' (1933, p.8). We have our systems of ideas, our research, our evidence (we need to have in order to prosper in the interlocked environments of academic publishing and the modern university) but it is all finally dispensable without fundamentally jeopardising what the humanities do; which is to make and explore, at different depths of curiosity and explanation, the connections between thinking and conduct, between experience and history, between living and making, between imagination and things, between cultures past and cultures present.

On the other hand, it can also be argued that a distinctive feature of the humanities today is their failure actually to make such connections – or perhaps it is a failure to make something more of the connections once established. In a letter to the Times Higher Education Supplement some eight years ago, Professor Pirt of the University of London catalogued the features of a general malaise (environmental, social, economic – it was that kind of time) and suggested 'that the universities should accept some responsibility for the national decline, since one of the causes is the indifferent advance of knowledge and a failure to achieve a sane synthesis of ideas' (17.2.84, p.2). We might be more precise and point the finger at the humanities, asking why in particular their connective function (pursuing the 'sane synthesis') appears to have broken down. A couple of years after Pirt's letter, the editor of the THES was suggesting that 'if the humanities cannot defend themselves they are not worth defending' while speculating that part of the problem might lie with the intentions of the humanities, 'now so overlaid by layers of accumulated academic expertise that they have become difficult to excavate' (7.11.86). Setting aside such public pessimism, and in the spirit of Oakeshott's philosopher without books (those layers of expertise), I want to list a few of the ways in which the humanities might be trying to achieve their foundational intention – which is to impose a distinctive kind of order on the available facts (of which there are now so many of course):

- to understand complexity but not necessarily to simplify it (an assertion open to all sorts of misinterpretation, but all I mean by it is that our point is not to drive towards the elementary particles but to explore the

complex structures – of ideas, of values, of narratives – that have been made from them);

- to find meaning in the particular instance (rather than in science's universal laws) – hence Michel Foucault's dismissal of any supposedly universalised intellect in favour of 'l'intellectuel specifique';
- to maintain reiterative work – in other words to re-visit the same problems time and again on the basis of a contention that no solutions are final;
- to resist an inflexible subdivision of the topics of inquiry – boundaries remain permeable;
- to work with different 'depths' of explanation – from surface description through exploration of the relationships among 'given' elements to the underlying structures that construct those elements (so linguistics might accurately describe a text, historical studies relate it to its context and literary theory unravel the ideological construction of the linguistic surface – mutually informative approaches operating at different depths of curiosity and explanation, none necessarily taking precedence over the others).

The intellectual 'sub-culture' to which this leads emphasises a number of things: the writing of books rather than research papers (simplifying complexity, opting ruthlessly to isolate a sub-topic, can be done in a paper whereas presenting and understanding complexity needs a book); demands for research time more than research funds (the particular is relatively easy to get at and Oakeshott's curious thinker needs minimal resources); personal rather than team work (reiterative inquiry encourages selection of topics that take the individual researcher's fancy rather than collaborative extension of a 'frontier'); and a very wide variation in the kinds of work being done (where rigid subdivision would have created compartments of clearly similar work). Finally, it leads to disciplinary divisions within the humanities that are more to do with the typical depth or level of explanation sought than with fundamentally different objects of inquiry.

This latter, and the over-emphasis on the lone scholar, are undeniably problems. Although boundaries between topics of study remain fluid, the levels of explanation have hardened into layers of academic expertise, each concentrated at its own 'depth'. So historians, literary critics, media theorists, etc. tend not to have as much to say to each other as one might have hoped. Solutions are being

found: systemic linguistics operates at much the same depth as post-structuralist literary studies, historians are drawing on narrative theory, media theorists on advances in the philosophy of meaning, and so on. However, as these re-alignments and associations continue to develop, another potential solution to the problem has already been found: the Combined Humanities degree based, as at the University of Ulster, on the principle of 'delayed and informed choice'. Students gradually construct elements of specialism for themselves while moving more freely than do their teachers from subject to subject and, therefore, across the various available depths of explanation within the humanities.

What those of us working in the humanities may be discovering is that in an increasingly complex world it is this very movement through different depths of explanation that effectively transforms information into knowledge for the curious thinker. If so, there may be something important here in relation to our understandings of competence. But the consequences, for teaching and learning, of those other four broad objectives or intentions of the humanities have not yet been adequately thought through. The complex, the particular, the reiterative, the flexibly and permeably defined – these are all going to be more adequately encountered in some kinds of learning situation and not in others. Can we tell the one from the other? In fact existing teaching methods tend to work in precisely opposite ways, undermining at least four of the intentions.

Lectures and seminars mostly aim at simplifying the complex – this is the very principle of note-taking, to distil out some essence that can be memorised for examination purposes. Where I might study a subject by surrounding myself with all its complex detail and finding ways, in what I write, to maintain some sense of that density, when I teach about it I am more likely to put half a dozen key points up on the blackboard and students readily copy them down in the hope that this is all they need to know. The particular becomes merely illustrative detail rather than material in which the learner is invited to immerse herself and on which she is being asked to work. One topic tends to follow another in the progression of typical lecture-based courses, seldom are earlier topics returned to and re-explored. When Chaucer is done that's it, because it's seventeenth century poetry next week. Finally, the structure of course components and lecture topics tends to be based on rigid and impermeable boundaries, neat 'boxes' of content that give a course and a timetable an acceptable structure. In short, the irony is that in the humanities we tend not to teach in the way that we work.

I am not suggesting that clear structures, neat summaries, step-by-step progression and distilled-out essences are unnecessary; rather that we have elevated them to the status of the only and best way to teach and learn when all the time we know that the kinds of competence we value often work differently. Some steps towards being more explicit about the latter are needed and then some effort towards making more teaching and learning capable of carrying those alternatives.

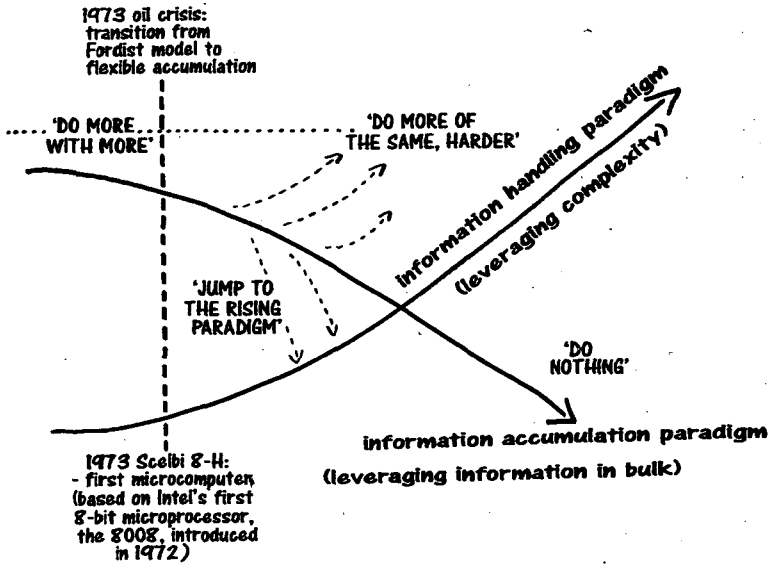
Before addressing more specific questions about teaching and learning, it will be sensible to think, for a moment, about the larger picture of change which frames these details. The creation of a flexible, adaptable and comprehensive system of competence-definition in the UK has been a response to the large-scale shift from relatively inflexible mass production in the developed economies to flexible systems of 'customized' manufacturing for a patchwork of market niches which change all the time. It is unsurprising perhaps that the emerging framework of national education and training should be geared towards a similar adaptability rather than the mass production of people with either largely undifferentiated competences or inflexible packages of narrowly defined skills. But it should also be unsurprising if we find that work in the humanities is having to address the consequences of this shift, particularly as it has affected the nature and quantity of the information available to work on.

A paradigm shift

The most general perspective from which we can hope to get some sort of helpful angle on both the competence movement and what we do in the humanities (as well as their potential convergence) is the one that reveals the large-scale paradigm shift crudely sketched in Fig.3. (In depicting it this way I have drawn on both the rigorous analysis offered by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity* and the more colloquial description and pragmatically useful visualisation of the changes offered by Dudley Lynch and Paul L. Kordis in *Strategy of the Dolphin*, a book that is in most other respects more a symptom of the changes than an adequate account of them.)

The declining paradigm is the Fordist one, in which, like everything else, information was just stuff to be shifted around in bulk, keeping both encyclopaedia salesmen and university lecturers in jobs. The rising paradigm is part of the shift from Fordism to flexible accumulation, in which mass production, endless growth, doing more with more, have been revealed as crumbling ideas (for all sorts of

Figure 3

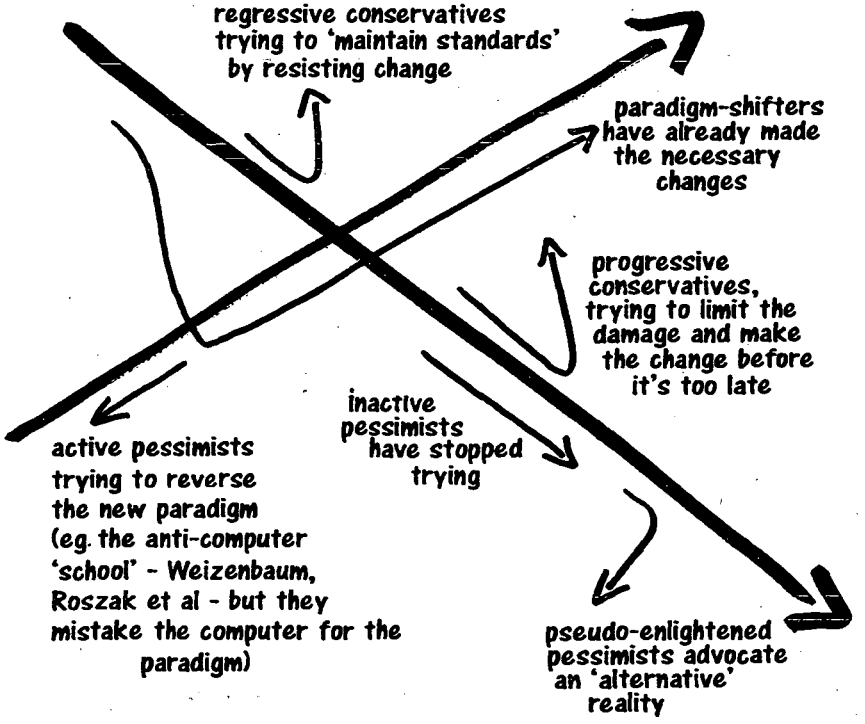


reasons which cannot be explored here). According to this paradigm, the ability to handle complexity is more important than simply shifting around masses of information.

Fig.3 is fairly self-explanatory about the various options presented by this paradigm shift and (with a nod in the direction of Lynch and Kordis for the idea that people don't converge on the cross-over point because their responses have already taken them off in various other directions). Fig.4 (overleaf) suggests some of the typical responses that we will encounter as these options become clearer. Universities are already full of such responses, although it is perhaps more honestly the case that each of us responds in a way which contains elements of the six kinds of response sketched here, in a sometimes uneasy balance. We may, for instance, work longer hours in trying to teach and assess more students in traditional ways or, at other moments, give up and resign ourselves to a loss of quality.

The point I want to make, and make strongly, is that in the humanities we have to achieve the paradigm shift, not by stumbling into it but explicitly, with clearer notions of competence and by linking these with our distinctive intentions.

Figure 4



In our teaching and the circumstances we set up for learners we have to offer the learner the opportunity to immerse herself in the particulars of the information that make up an object of inquiry and then ask of her that she develops the subtle and powerful skills of information handling which will allow her to cope. No system of carefully delineated sub-skills, 'core' or otherwise, will be helpful here unless we know how learning situations are effectively encouraging (or not) the development of information-handling competences. To meet the competence

movement halfway we may need to develop some new terms and concepts (see Fleming, 1991) but only insofar as these are necessary in agreeing on a way of talking about competence that preserves what we already know we value – the ability to step outside narrowly defined occupational competences in order to reflect on them in ways that free us from their over-simplifications, their often narrow perspectives and, quite typically, their incapacity for informed and beneficial change. Such critical recontextualisation of competence is vital but perhaps still not well understood and, therefore, not fully embedded in the ways we teach.

New styles of learning

Going back to the five core intentions of the humanities proposed above, each can be translated into a proposal for new styles of learning which more accurately embody what we believe we do in much of our own intellectual work as opposed to the conveniences of traditional teaching (rapidly becoming inconvenient as student numbers and the quantity of available information both increase). On the other hand, because those five intentions were offered for debate, the best I can do to finish here is offer five equally speculative suggestions about appropriate learning in the humanities:

(i.) Learners should be confronted, perhaps in lengthier workshop sessions than the traditional seminar, with intransigently complex material on which to work, and then invited to explore the range of options available for handling this complexity (which will necessarily involve group working, more readily available to learners than perhaps it is to their teachers);

(ii.) The particular, the detailed, should not slip into the role of illustrative background – instead of waiting for a lecturer to distil some essence out of the detail, learners should have to get deep into the particular themselves; which might be achieved by replacing some lectures with carefully structured packages of open-learning materials within which the learner has no choice but to attend to the details;

(iii.) Learning should loop back to earlier material to check how it might have changed in the light of new perspectives and developing confidence in a discipline of thought: I have a colleague who suggests that our students might only work on one film, for example, when they are studying cinema, but keep coming back to it throughout the three years

of their studies in order to apply new learning, new theories to which they have been introduced – an extreme version of the idea perhaps but surely containing more than a little intellectual honesty. More is less important than how. Yet we tend to heap more on our students as if that in itself will lead to learning.

(iv.) Learning should move smoothly across the boundaries we set up between topics for administrative convenience; perhaps through group project work in which different members of a group adopt different lines of inquiry, drawing on disparate and often separated elements of our teaching but pulling them together to address a shared problem;

(v.) Finally, the different depths of explanation available across the humanities as a whole should be available to learners as an integral part of their work – where appropriate, for example, a learner might be able to address a given problem or a project by first wearing the hat of a historian and then trying on the hat of a literary critic. Such interdisciplinary possibilities within a Combined Humanities programme still need to be teased out and made genuinely effective.

If we can get our own house in order, perhaps we will be better able to say to those with their own rather different intentions for the EHE Initiative and its role within the new national framework in the UK, 'This is what "enterprise" can come distinctively to mean within the Humanities'.

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