

The Place of Culture in the University

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The importance of place in higher education is being highlighted by at least two distinct developments. At a global level, the compression of time and space is heightening awareness of place and context. In higher education this is reflected in the quest for distinction in a highly competitive international market where geographic and cultural differences assume importance beyond product and other traditional signifiers. To some extent this trend affects all international corporations, but the context-dependence of universities accentuates the need for them to use geography to their advantage. This exigency is created despite, indeed partly because of, the rise of online universities. Far from undermining the importance of place, the rise of online learning reflects product convergence, as does the nascent Bologna process. These processes are moving higher education towards more commensurable degrees, and are thereby heightening the importance of other signifiers such as place to prospective students. Contemporaneously, pedagogical research has revealed the importance of constructivist learning at a local level, and the explicit value of place-based education in engaging students and meeting ecological challenges. Education is being re-centred around the student, and autonomous and collaborative learning are paramount. For higher education, the lessons of these global and local trends are clear: successful universities will be those which are aligned to strong regions, whose programs are distinguished by the context of their delivery, whose curriculum promotes the skills required for success in an era of mobility, and whose cultures reflect both community and student engagement.

Is the World Round, Flat or Spiky?

Globalisation has heightened the importance of place to universities in obtaining comparative institutional advantage. With the well-documented compression of space and time, 'the free flow of capital across the surface of the globe... places strong emphasis upon the particular qualities of the spaces to which that capital might be attracted' (Harvey 1990: 271). Indeed, the narrative of globalisation is not an inexorable flattening of the world, as Friedman argues (2005), but rather a world differentiated by new measures, and with new criteria for individual and organisational prosperity. Bauman notes that globalisation 'divides as much as it unites; it divides as it unites – the causes of division being identical with those which promote the uniformity of the globe' (1998: 2). The nature of these new divisions is documented in part by Richard Florida, who highlights the importance of geography in an examination of the creative class. Florida documents a rising creative class of workers which includes 'scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers and architects, as well as the thought-leadership of modern society' (2002: 69), and examines the places to which these workers are attracted.

By this account, the compression of time and space is calling attention to the importance of place, but this process is creating extraordinary inequities between 'creative' regions and those left behind. Place, Florida argues, 'has replaced the giant corporation of the industrial age as the central economic and social organising unit of our time' (2007: 161). Moreover, whereas Friedman concedes that the world is not

yet flat, Florida argues that it is actually becoming spikier. Friedman acknowledges that only some parts of China, India and other nations have flattened to date, and that the (desired) goal of flattening the rest of the world requires substantial additional resources (2005: 371-414). Florida, by contrast, maintains that while the movement of capital and, to a lesser extent, labour is becoming easier, global disparities are in fact growing. Inequity is rife not only between first and third world nations, as Friedman concedes, but among first world nations and, indeed, within nations such as the US. This is because the global, or creative, economy 'produces two kinds of jobs: high-paying creative occupations and lower-paying, less secure jobs' (2007: 187). The winners in the creative economy depend on 'a veritable army of service workers' to perform the tasks the winners have neither the time nor inclination to perform. Service workers, such as janitors, house cleaners and office clerks, comprise nearly half the workforce and earn less than half the salary of creative class workers on average (Florida 2007: 187).

The class division is now reflected in geography, which helps to explain why some of the wealthiest and most creative regions in the US, such as Silicon Valley, are surrounded by pockets of discontent and poverty. The link between class and geography is also reflected by political fault lines. Florida argues that the twenty-one most creative, high-tech regions in the US voted Democratic at rates 17 per cent above the national average in 2000 (2007: 219). As economic fault lines develop around geography, the challenge for regions and nations is to create an attractive place not only for capital, but for the increasingly mobile resource of labour. As Bauman notes, 'mobility has become the most powerful and most coveted stratifying factor' (1998: 9) in the era of globalisation. Contemporary higher education institutions are competing for a class of people who are highly mobile and, by virtue of their mobility, pivotal to the economic prosperity of regions and nations.

Mobility: Nations, Regions and Universities

Florida focuses on three key factors important to creating a creative economy: technology, talent and tolerance. These three elements combine within universities, which are themselves the 'intellectual hubs of the creative economy... regions with flourishing universities are usually economically strong and highly placed on the creativity index (Florida 2007: 251-2). For this reason, it is crucial that regions and nations attract this highly mobile cohort to their universities, and also that they develop incentives to keep these students in the local workforce following graduation. University students 'are the canaries of the global competition for talent, and the countries that succeed in attracting them gain advantages on multiple fronts' (Florida 2007: 147). Florida notes that universities are obvious talent magnets and vanguard technological centres, but are also centres of tolerance and diversity, where students of different backgrounds come together to discuss a broad range of ideas and form multiple communities and networks. One substantial challenge for universities is therefore to foster and promote these communities, and to offer a student experience on campus which extends beyond the borders of disciplinary knowledge. Prospective student decisions will be made according to the likely quality of the overall experience while studying, and this in turn will depend on the depth of institutional engagement with place.

Much of Florida's account accords with the work of Simon Marginson, who emphasises the importance of higher education to national prosperity. Marginson steps back to consider the historic role of universities in nation-building within Australia after World War II, where he maintains that universities were seen as 'the key to military and economic competitiveness, industrial development and social progress' (2002: 411), and an explicit part of the nation-building project. By the 1990s, the homogenising forces of globalisation, dwindling public resources, and increasing corporatisation had begun to adversely affect the capacity of universities to contribute to the national project, both in Australia and overseas. Nevertheless, as Marginson notes,

The old nation-building project has not disappeared, it has been refocussed on position and strategy in a global context. Globalisation relativises the nation, without abolishing it. It highlights the constructed nature of national identity. It emphasises the changeable, precarious nature of all identity. (2002: 414)

Under globalisation, universities are typically more open and accept a larger and more diverse student cohort than ever before, exemplified by the vast numbers of international students in nations such as Australia. Nevertheless, these institutions remain 'grounded in "thick" and complex relations within the local societies they serve (Marginson 2002: 414). They also remain, in most cases, reliant on continuing public funding, and for these reasons the notion of the university as a boundless, trans-national corporation is deeply flawed. Like Florida, Marginson believes that higher education needs to be harnessed to a renewed project of nation-building. He argues that in smaller nations such as Australia, strategies need to be developed jointly between higher education and government sectors in order to maximise geographic advantage relative to other Anglo-American countries. These strategies might include the development of 'linguistic capacity and bi-cultural curricula so as to engage more deeply with East and South-East Asia, strengthening the "gravitational pull" of that region relative to the USA and EU' (2002: 426). For both Florida and Marginson, universities are central to economic prosperity, and their strength is tied to regional/national success. This is an important entry point into the question of what universities themselves can do to shape their regions, and to increase their comparative advantage in an environment where place is now paramount.

As noted, universities are inherently context dependent, and are generally embedded within their local communities. The extent to which they are embedded has frequently been measured by notions such as community engagement, difficult though this concept is to quantify or even define. As Wallis notes, many definitions of community engagement reflect only knowledge transfer (transmission model), community consultation or service, and other relationships which are essentially one-way, rather than relationships whose outcomes are mutually beneficial to both the university and the partner organisation (Wallis 2006: 1). Nevertheless, it is within the realm of genuine, mutually beneficial community engagement that place and culture meet. Some place-dependent universities appear explicitly engaged with their communities, and outwardly advertise their region as a reason to study at the university. Universities are important to the success of regions and nations, but the reverse is often also true. Engaged universities will be best placed to consider the community as a 'curricular lens' (Theobald 2006: 330), through which disciplinary knowledge can be developed.

Community engagement involves networks and relationships at various levels, but it also involves substantial change to the content and context of product delivery. Multi-campus universities, for example, are well placed to offer their students multiple contexts for placements. Teachers, nurses and other professionals may be given opportunities to study in both metropolitan and rural contexts, or in linguistically and culturally disparate areas over the course of their degree. Providing different contexts and sites of learning for students is one way in which comparative and, arguably, pedagogical advantage can be gained. The same argument informs notions of global citizenship and international exchanges. International exchanges are rightly valued because of the different context and subsequent experience they provide students. If mobility is to be the new currency of status, higher education institutions will need both to promote and to offer mobility to their students. Moreover, their students will require the crucial skills associated with mobility, such as working with diversity and developing inter-personal skills. These skills will need to be explicitly developed in the courses offered, but will also need to be reflected in the broader university experiences offered to students, including student leadership, volunteering, and opportunities to commune with fellow members of the creative class.

Pedagogy and Cognition

Despite discussion of unanchored power and the importance of extraterritorial spaces in which contemporary power resides (Bauman 1998), students and workers continue to move between rather than through places. Mobility is thus an important but insufficient condition for individual prosperity. Success depends not only on the ability to move, but on the ability to stay - in a range of varied and diverse environments to which economic and creative opportunities have lead. Workers who are confident with diversity, easily able to establish networks, multi-lingual and culturally educated are those for whom the global opportunities of mobility will be available. Educationally, this means that providing exposure to multiple contexts and learning environments will be central to instilling these values. Yet success will depend on the depth of student engagement as well as its breadth. It is at this point that the pedagogical arguments for place-based education become important.

Place-based education, also known as service learning, is frequently proposed as a response to student alienation and disengagement, but is usually directed at schools rather than higher education institutions (Strike 2004). The starting point for this theory is the individual, and the nature of individual learning. Place-based education emphasises constructivism and inquiry learning. Students are encouraged to learn through experience, and problems are faced within the immediate, real-world physical environment. Rather than a transmission model of learning, based on the presumption of fixed knowledge to be transmitted, students are taught that 'knowledge and values are contextual, evolving and changing over time, and individually and culturally constructed by both children and adults alike' (Hutchison 2004: 37). Context and place become not only sites for learning but sites of learning, and the school environment becomes an intrinsic part of the curriculum across all traditional disciplines.

Advances in pedagogy and cognition are thus primarily responsible for the emphasis on place-based education within schools. Guiding principles include that learning is relational and based on communicative and interpersonal skills; that knowledge is neither fixed nor the exclusive preserve of authorities (teachers); that the student cohort is diverse, featuring a number of different intelligences; and that student autonomy is central to engagement (Theobald 2006; Strike 2004; Gruenewald 2003). Added to these pedagogical principles is the environmental imperative to understand place, influenced by global developments such as climate change, resource scarcity and habitat destruction. Importantly, though, renewed interest in place-based education moves beyond the explicit study of environment and geography to consideration of the role of place and context across and beyond the curriculum. While external factors such as global warming have highlighted the relationship between local action and global consequences, place-based education is about recognising pedagogical as well as environmental change. The renewed focus on context is ultimately about placing the student at the centre of the learning experience.

There are obvious reasons why place-based education has been focussed on schools to date. While constructivist learning has strong appeal in school environments, universities arguably remain focussed on specific disciplinary knowledge. While schools are more easily able to focus on community, teamwork and collaborative learning, university education is increasingly seen as a private good, with students paying high fees and facing assessment which primarily measures individual knowledge through essays, exams and dissertations. Further, schools are more local by their nature - smaller entities whose students overwhelmingly come from the surrounding geographic area, and whose fortunes ebb and flow with those of the places in which they are situated. Universities compete regionally and globally for students, typically comprise students from diverse areas and nations, and may themselves range across several campuses and countries. Moreover, many university students have few contact hours on campus, and increasing numbers conduct their study entirely online, in contrast to the physical attendance demands of schools.

These differences constrain the ability of universities to offer place-based education in the sense now conceived by many school communities. However, the resurgence of interest in place at school level is far from irrelevant to higher education. The same pedagogical and environmental arguments suggest the need for revision of traditional higher education models of curriculum, and are linked to broader globalisation changes which refocus place at the centre of the university experience. Adapting to the advances in pedagogy, to the imperatives of geography, and to the reality of global competition, requires changes to the traditional university template. Universities have typically focussed on community engagement more than student engagement, and on knowledge transfer more than knowledge co-production. Students in various disciplines have been sent on placements, but the place of the placement has rarely been deemed significant to the experience. Arguably, this under-privileging of context within universities reflects an under-appreciation of the pedagogy of place, of the situated nature of learning at all levels, and also of the skills now required of graduates for success in the knowledge economy. Yet the values emphasised within place-based education at school level are precisely those values required for university graduates to fulfil the promise of mobility. A greater emphasis on place-based education may enable universities to promote collaborative and autonomous skills, engaged learning, and linguistic and cultural diversity across all programs. By

enriching the pedagogy of programs in this manner, meaning and value can be added to learning experiences both on and off campus.

Conclusion

The effects of place on higher education are manifold and manifest. The importance of place to promotion of the university, and as a point of differentiation, has been underlined in consideration of the growing geographic cleavages of globalisation. Students will be attracted to universities in particular regions where creativity is recognised and celebrated, and where a broad student experience is offered. This realisation places responsibility on community and national leaders to support strong and distinct higher education institutions. For their part, university leaders can distinguish themselves not only by highlighting institutional position in a creative or prosperous region, but by offering students opportunities to maximise their mobility, for example by providing education in multiple contexts. Further, the curricula of successful universities will be designed to engender the skills necessary for effective mobility, such as teamwork, communicative and interpersonal skills, and the ability to harness diversity. Place-based pedagogies will be widely used to secure these skills, and to ensure close engagement of students. Wherever place is recognised for its geographic, cultural and pedagogical significance, students will move to the centre of the university experience, and considerations of place will inform the content, context and culture of program delivery.

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