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Keynote addresses

The following abstracts have been provided by keynote speakers. Full versions of their presentations will be found on the HERDSA web site at: <http://www.herdsa.org.au>

Keynote three: Learning for an unknown future

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The future is always unknown so what, if anything, is particular to the kinds of futures ahead of us? How is it that the idea of 'learning for an unknown future' might have a particular resonance at this time? At the risk of presumptuousness, I believe that this idea can be given some weight.

En route, a familiar canard awaits: if the future is unlike the past, how can we prepare for it? Even more, if the future is unlike the past, how can learning itself gain a purchase? Learning, surely, has application where some degree of reliability can be assured: the learning has meaning or can be put to work where there is some degree of determinability about the relevant situation. But if nothing can be sure about the relevant situation, how does any learning gain any anchor? How can learning be put to use if there is no connecting tissue between one situation (yesterday's) and another (tomorrow's)?

In fact, the situation that we are in is even more problematic. It is a situation of *supercomplexity*. At one level, a situation of supercomplexity is characterised by the presence of four moments or attributes: contestability, challengeability, uncertainty and unpredictability. At another (and deeper) level we have no agreed way even of describing the situation in which we find ourselves.

Bauman speaks of 'liquid modernity' and there is much talk these days of 'fluidity' and 'messiness'; and such metaphors of fluids and liquids are telling. But they do not quite bring out the particular character of a supercomplex age. At least, in a fluid situation, one arguably could look to a peaceful resolution, to a calming influence, to a stillness. But, amid supercomplexity, no such stability is ever on the cards. For, by definition, a situation of supercomplexity is present where we have no way of coming to a common understanding of the situation in which we find

ourselves. In a fluid situation, at least we are all in the same pool even if the waters are turbulent. Amid supercomplexity, we come at matters through our own frameworks, frameworks that do not necessarily engage with each other.

Another way of putting the point is to say that an age of supercomplexity is an age of conceptual risk. It is an age in which concepts, ideas and beliefs run against each other without resolution and without hope of resolution. In turn, the consequences of such conceptual mayhem are impossible to foretell.

One cause (though only one cause) of this situation is the growth of universities across the world. Tens of thousands of chemistry journals, a sizeable proportion of national income in the developed world and over 100 million students: the extraordinary growth of universities and higher education has been to accelerate the production of academic knowledge. More and more ideas are being put into the world. A world of supercomplexity is, in part, a sign that universities have been realising their inner aim. If the world was without a surfeit of ideas, concepts and frameworks, it would suggest that universities had become quiescent. It follows, therefore, that – now – not only is the future going to be unlike the past but that, in addition, we know that to be the case. In this uncertainty, there are levels of uncertainty. Systems, technologies, institutions and our symbols for comprehending the world will change incessantly and probably with increasing rapidity. And these changes are complex in a formal sense: their interactions and the implications of their interactions cannot be known or unravelled. We have to engage with these features of life in a state of some non-comprehension. But, and more fundamentally, there is no description of the world itself that we can hang onto with any assuredness.

If the first level of uncertainty points to a fragile world, the second level of uncertainty points to an intractable world, an elusive world and, even, a dissolving world.

As a result of these two forms of uncertainty running past each other, we have the extraordinary double feature of modern life: it both is extraordinarily busy on the one hand (there is an infinite number of demands coping with Uncertainty 1) and yet presents a sense that it is all a void, an illusion (Uncertainty 2). These two forms of uncertainty are quite different in their effects. The first presents with profound cognitive and even epistemological challenges. These can be challenges of considerable stress, of not having enough information to determine a good course of action, of being placed in an ethical dilemma, of being unsure of the consequences of an action. The second, however, presents with ontological challenge and even disturbance. It is a situation in which we can no longer be sure of our identity. In the contemporary world, what is a doctor? What is a professor? What, even, is a university? As knowing subjects, our hold on the world is loosened, if not broken apart all together.

There are two major educational problems in a world of uncertainty, therefore. What is it to know in such a world? And, what is it to be in such a world? Of these, it is the second that is the more pressing, for if we can give an answer to that, the first dissolves to a large degree. After all, if we can find a way of living with uncertainty, then we can be more comfortable in coping with the uncertainty of knowledge.

The problem of ‘learning for an unknown future’, then, turns out to be a problem about learning how to be and how to live in a world of uncertainty. To put it crisply, the fundamental

educational challenge today is not one of knowledge but is one of being: how are we to live effectively with ourselves and with others in a world of uncertainty; in a world that is always liable to erupt cognitively if not empirically. (The conceptual bombs go off, even if the bombs don't actually go off in the marketplace.)

Three kinds of response are liable to be forthcoming to an analysis along these lines. Firstly, it will be said that there is nothing new here. Secondly, it will be said that the matter has already been addressed and answered in the form of 'transferable skills'. And thirdly, it may be felt that it is just a matter of putting our knowledge to work even more effectively. I reject all of these arguments. I consider that, while there has always been social and technological change, often accompanied by cognitive change, the changes in question are of an increasing form of complexity. In such a situation, too, in which tomorrow may not be like today, so-called transferable skills are in difficulty: on the one hand, there may not be anything that is sufficiently common to two situations in order for skills to 'transfer'; on the other hand, in a situation in which there are profoundly competing definitions of the situation (in which, for example, ideals of competition and social justice may slide past each other), skills are immaterial. Lastly, the hope of 'technology transfer' occludes precisely what is in question: what is the situation into which the technology is to be transferred? (The saga of genetically modified foods is a nice case in point.)

The question remains: what is it to live in a world in which not just the world can be turned upside down but we are not even sure how to describe the world in which we find ourselves? Another way of putting the matter is to ask: To what end are we to put our knowledge? Or, to what end are we to put our skills? It is not that answers to these questions are not readily forthcoming; quite the reverse. It is that we are overwhelmed with answers to these questions but that they are fundamentally disparate and even incompatible with each other.

What, then, is learning in such a situation? It is, after all, a situation in which the future is unknown not just because our social institutions and our technologies and even our languages change but because we simply cannot know it (either cognitively or practically) with any assuredness? Learning, in such a situation is both easy and impossible. It is surely a matter of acquiring the dispositions to live amid such conceptual and practical instability. It is to acquire the ontological wherewithal to live effectively in a world that threatens continually to dissolve, cognitively speaking.

What is the prospect for such a view to gain root in our universities? Surprisingly, the omens are at least not unfavourable; and they may even be positive.

Over time, curricula have been showing signs of widening such that they call for a broader range of students' capabilities to be developed. In itself, this might not amount to much and could even be counter-productive. It could just be that students were being asked to extend the fields of knowledge in which they were competent or to widen their skills. Indeed, there is little talk of 'curriculum' as such and much more talk of 'skills'. As a result, driven by an 'outcomes' led agenda, curricula could be simply driving up students' abilities to perform in certain ways. Such a 'performative' turn in higher education curricula could never promise a learning for an uncertain world.

Yet, within these developments, mistrustful as one may be tempted to be, are hopeful signs. For, in the widening of curricula, students are often being pulled more into their programmes of study. Their being as persons is brought more into play as they tackle the tasks put before them and open themselves to the experiences that confront them. Work-based learning, reflective learning logs, group work, projects that are actual forms of consultancy for external firms, problem-based learning, historical simulations, creative writing, action in the community, peer tutoring, and peer assessment: these and very many other examples of curricula innovations invoke the student not just as a knower or practitioner but also call upon the student to give of themselves as persons. Their selves as human beings are no longer held separate but are drawn into the curriculum.

Curricula, therefore, are becoming triple sites of knowing, acting and being. And it is this last, the tacit welcoming of being into a curriculum, that offers the prospect of a learning for an uncertain world. For, in the opening of a curriculum to the self, the opportunity opens of dispositions appropriate to a milieu of uncertainty being encouraged and being developed. What might these dispositions be? They would include dispositions of openness, fortitude, courage, resilience, determination, carefulness and tolerance. It is precisely dispositions, or orientations, such as these that are going to furnish the ontological wherewithal to engage effectively and resourcefully with an uncertain future.