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Engaging academics

Introduction

Our basic argument has been a simple one: the idea of curriculum is not one that is *explicitly* seen to be much in evidence in higher education and deserves, even needs, to come much more into view. With rare and evident exceptions, this is the case in all kinds of spheres in public debate about higher education, in the thinking in key national agencies, in the projects concerned with learning and teaching underway in institutions, and in course teams. This void is apparent, we have noted, in the academic literature: even those who concern themselves with thinking about and researching into teaching and learning matters in higher education have shrunk from attending to the curriculum as such.

There is, therefore, a large set of challenges in engaging academics over the curriculum. Thinking about the curriculum, discussing it, coming forward with imaginative ideas for conceptualizing it, designing research projects that examine aspects of the curriculum, actually developing and putting in place new kinds of curricula with an explicit associated rationale and developing momentum in favour of the curriculum as such: there could hardly be a larger project ahead of the higher education sector. It is a project that could and should take off at different levels: at course level, at departmental level, at institutional level and at national level (Becher and Kogan 1992). It is a project that has implications for structures, for values and for individuals. It is a project that would have both research and developmental dimensions. It is a project that could be taken up not only within the academic community itself but in the wider community, including the press and other public media.

The invisibility of curricula

Identifying possibilities for such a project at the different levels in higher education is far from straightforward, involving as it does structures, values and individuals. But in addition is a further challenge that we have not quite brought out in our book so far. Why is it that, in the UK at least, there are now hundreds of projects in the higher education sector being conducted on aspects of teaching and learning, but little explicit attention being given to the curriculum? A number of reasons could be ventured, some of which we have implied in our discussion at the outset of this inquiry. An absence of 'curriculum' among teaching and learning projects can be understood, in part, as the outcome of a confluence of interests precisely in *not* wanting to see the matter of 'curriculum' being given overt attention. To raise up 'curriculum' for public debate would be likely to press on sensitivities that we exposed earlier, which are associated with values and interests of the different stakeholders: the academics for whom teaching is characteristically a set of processes that hinge, in the first place, around their epistemological interests; and the state and employers as consumers for whom higher education is more a matter of marketable skills.

But there is another reason for the invisibility of the idea of curriculum, even in projects that are focused on learning and teaching matters. This is that there is an invisibility about the curriculum itself. One can go into a classroom and, however misguidedly, believe that one is observing both teaching and learning. In fact, at best one is observing a rather limited portion of the activities covered by the concept of 'teaching' and one is barely observing learning as such at all. Indeed, it is not at all clear that one could ever observe learning: that learning is taking or has taken place can only be a matter of judgement over time, an inference drawn from evidence accumulated over time. But at least one could be forgiven for thinking that in going into a classroom one is observing teaching and learning: in front of one are activities in which, characteristically, at least one teacher and several or many students are involved, activities that are intended to induce learning.

In contrast, curricula are much less obvious candidates as objects of perception. It is rather like seeing a train on the move down a railway track and imagining that such a spectacle can tell one much about a railway system. Indeed, 'curriculum' is an even more problematic concept than 'railway system' for it is something in which teachers, students and others are implicated in a way that engines are not involved in railway systems. Curricula live in and are subject to the interpretations and intentions of those conducting the activities that in part constitute a curriculum. Curricula live in hearts and minds, it might be said; more formally speaking, in intentions. But curricula also live in educational structures (courses, programmes, and the like), in educational concepts and in institutional and disciplinary cultures.

All of these features of curricula are self-evidently elusive stuff. Being elusive does not make them flimsy, however. On the contrary, educational

structures and concepts, and institutional and disciplinary cultures are robust. They supply boundaries and demarcation lines and even student identities (as Bernstein and Bourdieu, in their different ways, spelt out). But they possess, nonetheless, an invisibility that teaching and learning do not share in quite the same way.

Rather than an invisibility, perhaps it would be better to speak of the elusiveness of curricula. A feature, surely, of this elusiveness is the many different conceptions of curricula that we noted in the earlier part of our book. On the one hand, there are the largely tacit conceptions of curricula, whether it be that a curriculum is an initiation into the mysteries of a discipline, a vehicle for personal transformation, or a means of affirming or even denying a level of pre-existing social capital. On the other hand, there are the more analytic and even educational interpretations of curriculum, especially evident in a *curriculum-as-designed* and a *curriculum-in-action*.

All these interpretations of 'curriculum', whether they be presuppositions held by practitioners or more analytic accounts proffered in scholarly mode, underwrite the elusiveness of curriculum. 'Now you see it . . .' Curriculum, in any of these interpretations, has a will-o-the-wisp quality. It is a bit like gravity or a set of sub-atomic particles: we infer their presence by certain kinds of happenings. So with curricula: we infer we are in the presence of curricula when we see documents, reasonably orderly behaviour and transactions in particular settings and examination pass sheets.

There is too an instrumentality and an operational quality that attach to teaching and learning that does not so easily attach to curricula. Academics who teach and who are concerned about their teaching sooner or later have to start asking themselves questions about 'teaching' and 'learning'. Correspondingly, it is understandable if the state, in wanting to improve the effectiveness of higher education – in the context, say, of rising non-completion rates – focuses attention on teaching and learning. It is, so the reasoning could easily go, in the student's learning experience that her propensity to complete or to withdraw from a course is determined. There is an immediacy in the link that is being formed in that thinking, between completion (or non-completion) and the learning experience. The concept of the curriculum would not so readily come into the bureaucratic mind intent on improving institutional performance – as marked out by the metrics of progression and completion rates. It is too ephemeral a concept and even – whisper it *sotto voce* – too much an educational concept for it to gain firm purchase in instrumental thinking.

The idea of curriculum, therefore, is a shadowy concept. Glimpses are caught, occasionally, but its substance hardly, if ever, is manifest: on the one hand, only tacitly held within the activities and presuppositions of busy practitioners; on the other, a concept of the educationalists. There is little here in the way of a broad constituency that would propel 'curriculum' forward as an idea for higher education in the twenty-first century. To return to our starting point in this book, it is hardly surprising that there is no public debate over curriculum as such.

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There may just have been odd periods when 'curriculum' was more than a discomforting term. The birth, in the UK, of a clutch of universities in the 1960s brought with it much thought – even at vice-chancellor level – over curriculum matters. But times move on. Now we are into a more pragmatic age in which certain agendas impress their weight. On the analysis offered so far, it seems that not only is there no debate about curriculum as such but there never could be; there is simply no room for it nowadays. That would be an unduly pessimistic and premature conclusion.

Moving on?

We have been urging that a serious debate over curriculum is badly needed. But this conjoined elusiveness and invisibility of curricula that we have been noting poses certain challenges to any such debate getting off the ground.

In the first place, such a debate has to create space for itself. As we have seen, almost all the discourses in and around higher education act so as to forbid talk of curriculum, or at least to give it a frosty countenance. Mention of 'curriculum' is liable to receive a veritable cold shoulder. A wide debate about curriculum matters, therefore, is not easily going to be brought about. This is a matter on which academics and others have no wish to be engaged. The sheer establishment of such a debate calls for political adroitness of the highest order. Hearts and minds have to be won over not so much to any particular curriculum idea or model but rather to the very prospect of a general discussion about curriculum itself.

The second challenge that attaches to the task of establishing a debate about curriculum matters arises from its elusive and invisible character. As if the frisson that is liable to break out among pretty well most of the parties present at the sheer mention of 'curriculum' was not enough, its elusiveness and invisibility add further challenges to the would-be debater. Its elusiveness could easily suggest to the faint-hearted that time spent on debating curriculum matters would be time ill-spent. Much better, surely, simply to press on with teaching, research, administration, generating additional income and all the other tasks facing the hard-pressed academic these days. Since the curriculum has an elusive quality, talk about it is at best frivolous and at worst represents a financial cost. Curriculum is distinctly difficult to pin down so why waste time trying to? Just when it seems to come into view – as we box it in through descriptions of course units, aims and objectives – so it flits off again into the even more shadowy form of 'curriculum-in-action'.

And then the elusiveness of curriculum becomes an invisibility. The more we peer at curriculum, the more it seems to recede from our reach. The more we talk about it, the more we examine it, the more mysterious it seems to be. It disappears before us, even as we may think it is coming into view. So, our would-be debater is in for a difficult time, or so it would seem. The discussion would undermine itself for it would reveal the essential trickiness of the concept of curriculum. It is a kind of naturalistic fallacy: what may

seem to be potentially within reach and self-evidently in front of one turns out to owe more to the eye of the beholder. A curriculum is not the kind of entity that exists straightforwardly in the world. Like the unicorn or the yeti, it is not so much that no one has ever seen a curriculum in full flight; it is more that it is the kind of entity that never could be immediately witnessed.

Given this dual character of a curriculum, then – its elusiveness and invisibility – it would be hardly surprising if those who are centrally engaged in bringing off a curriculum develop a jaundiced look at the mention of the curriculum. If their interest may be kindled initially, again it would hardly be surprising if that interest was quickly to evaporate as the apparently nebulous quality of 'curriculum' revealed itself. So the task of engaging academics and others in curriculum matters is fraught with difficulties. If engaging academics in discussion about unicorns and yetis is liable to run into scepticism, how much more so with curriculum? In other words, just at the point that one might want to move on, it is far from clear what moving on would mean.

Making space

Developing a debate means in the first place making space within which such a discussion can be held. Space has to be found, from the evidence we have presented here, at all the different levels in the system, from the course level through the institutional level to the national level. This is particularly the case with 'curriculum', even as compared with 'teaching' and 'learning' for, as we have seen, curriculum turns out to be an especially tricky concept. It has an abstractness to it that teaching and learning do not quite possess. Curriculum is, as it were, a particularly *conceptual* idea.

Two ideas, both Greek, may be of help here: *agora* and *ethos*. The first term – *agora* – has been given much air time of late, notably in a book by Helen Nowotny, Peter Scott and Michael Gibbons (2001). The idea of *agora* refers both to a meeting-place and to an actual meeting, and conjures a sense of the significance of public gatherings in Greek society. The *agora* was essentially an open space, both literally and metaphorically. In principle, anyone could go and join the meeting. In practice, as is well known, things didn't work like that and many were excluded even from an open public space. But one of its key features was that conversations were more open than the (Roman) Senate. The *agora* was public in a way that the Senate was not and, in turn, it had fewer rules than the Senate. The Senate was a relatively orderly affair in comparison to the *agora*: the *agora* had much less in the way of public comportment, of a sense of turn-taking and of rhetorical rules.

It is the relative openness of the *agora* that has opened the way for the recent spin put on it by Nowotny et al. For them, the mode of the production of scientific knowledge, especially in its so-called Mode 2 variant, is rather relaxed. It is not lawless, certainly, but it does not obey the formal rules and regulations, so to speak, of Mode 1 knowledge, which has to follow the rules, even though tacit, of the journal editors. Mode 2 knowledge lives in the real

world in all its messiness. Its meeting places are much less rule-bound than those of formal and for some archaic Mode 1 knowledge. It solves problems *in situ*, as they arise; and very often these are practical problems to do with getting on or even just getting by in the world.

But a relative lack of rules does not mean that things are easy or that anything goes; neither is true. Things are not easy in the real world of the *agora*: all kinds of voices present themselves and all kinds of practical problems loom into view. The working out of this complex of voices and problems has to take place in a particular context: the *agora* of one town is not the same as that of another. So, it follows, anything most definitely does not go. It may be that there is an infinity of ways of resolving the melée of voices and problems, but at the same time this context forbids certain kinds of solution. The *agora* may not have the formal and easily detectable rules of the Senate, but there are rules, boundaries and even standards. To be heard, to be taken seriously in the *agora*, requires a certain way of conducting oneself.

Is this comparison between the *agora* and the Senate not suggestive for our present inquiry? When we say that there is need for a discussion to be instituted about curriculum matters and for a space to open, is it not more the discussion and the space of the *agora* rather than the Senate that is required? In a matter so elusive as 'curriculum', academics are hardly going to be engaged if the discursive space being offered to them is Senate-like. After all, how many academics these days would willingly and spontaneously attend the meetings of the senate of their own university? The rules preclude a spontaneous discussion; they present a space liable to be filled only by rhetorical flourishes, not for real engagement with the issues. Surely *agora*-like spaces are called for if curriculum matters are to attract serious attention and authentic engagement.

This may sound rather abstract stuff with all this talk of *agoras*, senates and discursive spaces. In fact, we suggest that it is at the heart of the matter before us, which is a supremely practical matter. If there is both a lack of debate in and around the academic community in relation to 'curriculum' and if part of the source of the problem lies in the elusiveness of the very idea of curriculum, then the character of the space that might be opened up for discussion is of the essence. What, indeed, might the chief executive of the UK's new Higher Education Academy or a university vice-chancellor do on the proverbial Monday morning if such a person wishes to help to open a debate on curriculum matters? Our reflections here are surely suggesting that such a debate will never get off the ground if the attempt to fashion it is a highly structured exercise. Anything that unduly frames this discursive space will simply freeze the debate before it ever gets going. What is surely required is an *agora* where individuals will feel welcome to engage and to have their say in their own way.

What would an *agora* look like in practice? What would it mean to create an *agora* in which curriculum matters could and would be likely to be discussed? This question is easily asked – a crucial question of our times for those who

care about higher education – and yet it is possibly the most difficult question to answer (in higher education).

What an *agora* would look like in a course team, in a department and in a university would, of course, differ in those different settings. It would differ across disciplines and across institutions. As we have seen in this inquiry, disciplines and institutions shape in subtle ways (and sometimes not so subtle ways) how curricula are understood and practised. So the spaces in which academics can engage over curriculum matters are going to exhibit large variations. More than that, the establishment of such space calls for imagination, which in turn calls for academic leadership, and at the various levels of the sectors from course team to national level.

As we have seen, a national Learning and Teaching Support Network has been established in the UK, formed around individual disciplines, together with a Generic Centre. Therefore, at both discipline and national level there exists a national infrastructure to open up interactive spaces for discussion about curriculum matters. (See Appendix for some examples of such initiatives.) In particular, the new communication technologies present all sorts of possibilities for new interactive spaces, which in turn create issues over the character of such discussions. To what extent are such discussions to be controlled? To what extent are they to be managed, with deadlines, say, for a discussion to come to a temporary end? In what ways might some particular outcome be anticipated from such discussions? How would such an outcome be orchestrated?

In addition to such operational challenges associated with the management of the discussion, there is a further challenge. Suppose no one looked at the websites? In our present context, this is far from being a facetious question. After all, it was part of our earlier analysis that, while it may plausibly be said that every course team and even all university academics possess ideas about the curriculum, these ideas are held largely tacitly. Indeed, the term 'curriculum' is hardly ever used in the higher education community. So establishing websites that carry the word 'curriculum' in their titles is liable to be met with an electronic silence, if not downright antipathy.

Stratagems and strategies

The implications of these reflections are twofold: first, there is the apparently straightforward observation that leadership matters; second, that stratagems are called for every bit as much as strategies. Both of these points are worth spelling out.

If individuals do not have an explicit concept of the curriculum, if the idea of curriculum is itself open-ended, if we do not yet have an academic culture that is collectively concerning itself with curriculum matters, then simply opening up spaces for discussion is not enough. The discussion has to be engendered, and engendered perhaps without using the term 'curriculum' for its sheer use is liable to be counter-productive. On the other hand, the use of the term

'curriculum' may itself help to bring about a receptivity towards curriculum matters. If nothing else were to flow from this book, it might be a cardinal sign of its having an appropriate impact if every institution's *Learning and Teaching Strategy* was to be retitled *Curriculum, Learning and Teaching Strategy*.

But the point goes further than stratagems about terminology. What is at issue here is the preparedness of the academic community collectively to be involved in curriculum matters at some level of reflection.

Curriculum projects and curriculum initiatives (funded at institutional or national level) might be 'badged' as 'learning and teaching' projects and initiatives and much worthwhile and innovatory work might be conducted in that way. But ultimately, if curricula are substantially to develop and we are to have radical new thinking about the curriculum in higher education, sooner or later academics who teach are also going to have to address the matter head-on. Operational and discursive stratagems are important here: they can help get things going within a department, within a faculty, across an institution or across a discipline. Small sums of money can go a long way in curriculum innovation. But if we are to see change in curricula of the required order, the stratagems have to be accompanied by carefully worked out medium- to long-term strategies.

Actually, 'strategies' is too secure a term for what is needed here, even if 'strategies' is itself a flexible concept. A fundamental problem is this: How do we get off the ground a serious debate over curriculum matters if the concept of curriculum is not widely held? But this problem has near clones in more operational settings, for instance: How can we expect academic leaders to inaugurate a debate about curriculum matters if, dare we say, their own concept of curriculum is somewhat thin or desultory? How might a learning community in relation to curriculum matters be established when there is no one signing up for (as it were) courses on curriculum? In other words, 'strategies' – at all the different levels throughout the system – has to be understood generously here to include the fostering of a heightened understanding of and sensitivity towards curriculum matters. Such an understanding has to be fostered at all levels, including the relevant national bodies and the pro-vice-chancellors responsible for teaching and learning.

Engaging academics on curriculum matters calls for imagination in several directions. The course leader, the pro-vice-chancellor, senior officers in the relevant national bodies, heads of department, and learning and teaching coordinators: individuals in roles such as these are well placed to open up the kinds of spaces for action and debate. Pragmatically, the action and debate will probably be found to be mutually supportive of each other. Discussions on curricular matters will begin to have point, even legitimacy, if they are anchored in projects or other activities. But this is not to suggest that the individuals in the key positions have themselves to be 'champions' of curricular development. In their own settings – course, department, faculty, institution, discipline, or the sector as a whole – there will often be someone who either has or could quickly acquire a particular interest in the matter and who can impart energy to such a project.

Drawing on this discussion, then, a series of challenges are suggesting themselves in developing curricular strategies and in engaging academics:

1 *Challenges of language*: finding terminology that is going to resonate with the recipients' interests and situations, disciplinary and otherwise.
2 *Challenges of time and energy*: these two dimensions are separate but they also influence each other. With more energy, more time can be found.
3 *Challenges of resources*: as with learning and teaching projects in general, curriculum projects form a site where a little can go a long way.
4 *Challenges of legitimacy*: in higher education, to say that one is interested in or, more problematic still, responsible for curriculum matters is liable to lead to raised eyebrows or furrowed looks. Therefore, affirmation at the most senior levels in the system is crucial.
5 *Challenges of text*: the academic culture remains supremely literate. Sooner or later, if fast-moving streams of curriculum innovation and curriculum ideas are to be forthcoming, texts of some kind have to be produced. They have to include accessible and open texts, not just relatively closed texts such as academic journals. Texts of the *agora* and texts of the Senate are both needed. Each discipline and each university should be looking to produce lively and attractive magazines that embrace curriculum matters.
6 *The challenge of communication*: how interactive are the communication flows? Who is to initiate the conversation? In what mode or style? Who can join in? Surely, in such a moment of embryonic formation of curriculum debate, it is the open and democratic style of the *agora* rather than that of the Senate that should inform answers to these questions.
7 *The challenge of value*: there is little point in a senior lecturer spending part of her sabbatical leave in studying and thinking about a radical new form of curriculum if such efforts count for nothing in her subsequent application for a professorship. Or rather, there still remains point to the activity but it is unlikely to occur in such circumstances. Therefore, curriculum matters have to be valued and seen to be valued at all levels of the sector.
8 *The challenge of identity*: even if all kinds of reward and incentive structures are in place – both tangible and symbolic – engaging seriously with curricula ultimately is a matter of one's professional identity. It involves engaging with one's ultimate educational values and revealing them in the company of others. Engaging academics in curricular matters is therefore a risk-laden enterprise.
9 *The challenge of diversity*: as is well recognized and as we have seen in these pages, in having contrasting relationships to practice and epistemologies, different subjects will approach curricula in different ways. Efforts to engage academics within, say, a multifaculty university have to be sensitive to the diverse range of inner conceptions of curriculum that are naturally present at hand.

It will be evident in offering these reflections on strategy in curriculum matters that we have not resorted to the idea of 'managing the curriculum' (Bocock and Watson 1994) and we hope it will be clear why this is the case.

For us, perhaps above any other domain of university life, the curriculum presents such a wide range of near-intractable challenges that it is 'leadership' that is required before 'management'. This is a matter, above all, of hearts and minds. The systems certainly need to be organized and properly monitored and evaluated, but long before we get there we need bold imaginative new thinking about curricula. For that to happen on anything like a wide scale, academic *leadership* is required (cf. Ramsden 1998; Knight and Trowler 2001).

The scholarship of curriculum

Lurking behind considerations of the kind we are offering is a yet further matter, which we might term 'the scholarship of the curriculum'. We should like to offer a few thoughts on this phrase but do so by also picking up the idea of *ethos* that we flagged earlier on in this chapter. In effect, this book has been an extended plea that 'curriculum' should be taken seriously in the academic community. We have advanced the prospect of the academic community itself becoming, in effect, an extended 'learning community' in relation to curriculum matters. This is to say two things.

First, it is to say that the academic community, alongside developing a scholarship of its own towards learning and teaching, should also develop a scholarship of curriculum. Engaging in curriculum projects, being part of internet discussion groups and even designing new curricula are fine in themselves, but ultimately that kind of busy-ness, worthwhile as it is, has to be accompanied by more reflective modes of being in relation to curriculum matters. So we arrive at 'the scholarship of the curriculum'. Actually, we are somewhat uneasy with the term: it suggests closure and tight rule-keeping in forms of communication when what is called for is a rather more relaxed approach. But there can be no side-stepping engagement in deliberate, incisive and collective reflection on curriculum matters if well-founded but imaginative offerings are to be forthcoming. Here, something more of the ethos of the Senate is in order. Indeed, the establishment of a journal that was specifically focused on curriculum matters in higher education might be an important early step in this direction.

Second, it is to say explicitly that what is entailed in all of this is nothing short of an *ethos* in which the asking of questions about curriculum and the effort that is involved in imagining into being of an entirely new kind of curriculum are felt to be *natural*. That is, they attract no special attention because they are not special; or at least they are not felt to be special in the sense of being strange. They would remain special, however, because they would be important academic activities and recognized as such. Space would have been carved out by a pro-vice-chancellor for an open workshop, an institutional magazine would have been created to allow members of staff to share their curriculum ideas with each other, a member of staff would have been permitted by her head of department or dean to take a sabbatical (part

of which would be devoted to working up a paper or two on aspects of the curriculum), or from time to time departmental awaydays would be devoted to the curriculum.

At one level there is nothing new in any of this. It is what many universities around the world have been doing for some years in relation to learning and teaching. To conjure the phrase 'the scholarship of the curriculum' and to try to install it as a collective *ethos* can be seen, as we have implied, simply as an extension of 'the scholarship of teaching'. Beckoning here is an academic culture in which there is a collective care about curriculum. But there are differences between a scholarship of the curriculum and a scholarship of teaching. 'Curriculum' is, as we have noted, a particularly conceptual idea. Its sheer use invites and even requires care, thought, ideas, imagination. It calls for vision, for hopes of the future and for a positive attitude to the effect that things can go forward in an adventurous spirit. Precisely because it cannot be straightforwardly observed, the term 'curriculum' calls for deep reflection. It is a practical concept – in the end curriculum ideas have to be cashed out and put into action to become curricula-in-action – but it is also an ideational concept. The *ideas* are put into action.

Taking curricula seriously is necessarily a scholarly matter, at least of a kind. The curriculum lives in the mind and it is a proper subject, therefore, for scholarship. It is surely clear too that 'scholarship' here has to be understood generously, to include reflection of many kinds. Indeed, it is important not to legislate too severely here. We require a scholarship of the *agora* as much as of the Senate: the rules of this reflection should not be binding. What is needed is something of the hurly-burly of the *agora* coupled with something of the decorum and space of the Senate.

There is another difference as between the scholarship of curriculum and the scholarship of teaching: the former is characteristically a collective enterprise and markedly so more than the scholarship of teaching. Whereas a starting point for establishing a scholarship of teaching can sensibly be that of individual teachers and their own teaching practices, that individualistic approach makes much less sense in relation to the curriculum. Curricula these days are much more developed as a collective exercise, or at least managed as a collective exercise. But more than that, as we have seen, ideas about curricula are held collectively, even if tacitly. It is therefore the collective assumptions about curricula that need to be brought out into the open and examined, collectively.

An unintended consequence, therefore, of establishing a culture in which there is a positive ethos in favour of a scholarship of the curriculum is that the academic community may help to regenerate itself. Collective and systematic reflection on the curriculum can only help with a university's research activities, for such reflection may well lead to research projects and publications. More to the point here, a scholarship of the curriculum can form a theme in which academics find that they have a common interest in curriculum matters. Engaging the academics in curriculum matters may well

turn out to be a way for the university to engage with itself. A scholarship of the curriculum becomes a vehicle for *collective flourishing*.

Concluding reflection

This is a suitable moment to come clean about a problem that we have had, as authors, throughout the writing of this book. The problem can be expressed in a series of questions. Should we talk of 'the curriculum' or 'a curriculum'? Is 'curriculum' more of an adjective than a noun? That is to say, should we talk more, say, of curricular intentions or hopes rather than implying that curriculum is an entity in the world? Is 'curriculum' necessarily singular (always 'a curriculum') or can we talk as if there was a kind of generic curriculum, in the Platonic educational stratosphere? Is it 'curriculum matters' or 'curricula matters' or even 'curricula*r* matters'? This matter of the language of curriculum has bedevilled the writing of this book. However, we mention it at this late juncture because we have felt the problem in a particularly acute form in this chapter.

Why should this problem be felt with such acuity in this chapter and why is it worth mentioning the point now as we move towards the end of our book? The two questions can be met with a single answer. Our difficulty over language takes on an urgent character precisely in the context of engaging academics, or rather trying to engage academics, over curriculum matters. This matter of language is directly related to key planks of our argument and it is directly related to the politics of curriculum leadership.

Our difficulties over language are testimony to the ineffable character of curriculum and to the considerable difficulties in engaging academics over matters to do with it. If the language of curriculum is itself problematic, the task of engaging academics over curriculum matters is thwart with difficulty. In one of our starting points we noted that the absence of the term 'curriculum' does not mean that we are not in the presence of the concept of curriculum: a course team may have and indeed will have some concept of curriculum, even if it does not use the term. Therefore, it may be that academics are best engaged in curriculum matters if the term 'curriculum' is not actually to be heard. Out of sight or out of hearing need not mean out of mind.

Engaging academics over curriculum matters, therefore, calls for academic leadership of the highest order, requiring as it does a nuanced approach that is prepared to play the long game. It has been said that 'if management is the art of the possible, leadership is the art of the impossible' (Barnett 2003). Here though, it might be more to the point to say that if management is the art of the possible, leadership is the art of the imagination. For the task and achievement of leadership here, as has surely emerged, is nothing less than a triple challenge of imagination – imagination of conception (of curriculum), imagination of communication (in finding a language of curriculum in which to develop a conversational space), and

imagination of engagement (such that individuals are likely to engage with each other and to develop their own energy in doing so).

Engaging academics in curriculum matters, accordingly, turns out to be nothing short of engaging the university itself.

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