

Reference

McCowan, T. 2008. "Curricular Transposition in Citizenship Education." *Theory and Research in Education* 6: 153–172.

Gavin Baldwin

Middlesex University, London, UK

g.baldwin@mdx.ac.uk

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Imagining the University, by Ronald Barnett, London and New York, Routledge, 2013, xi + 188 pp., £29.99, ISBN 978-0-415-67204-7

In this deeply thought-provoking and searching book, Ronald Barnett analyses the concept and practice of the imagination in relation to the idea of the university. In his own words: 'My main quarry in this book is how we think about the university and how we might imagine it' (90). The book is an unraveling of the multiple structures of imagination.

He argues that the task of the imagination is as much practical as it is ideational:

'Head in the clouds, and feet on the ground: this could be said to be the motto of this book. Ontologically grounded...but yet with the imagination entering – soaring into, even – the realm of the infinite: this is the stance being urged here, in the struggle to understand the university and its possibilities' (123).

A summary of the book's contents is set out in the form of 15 theses in the *Introduction*, and the text is regularly punctuated by helpful repetition and summaries of the author's key ideas. The book is divided into four parts:

Part I: *Imagining the university*, in which the idea of the imagination itself, its possibilities, virtues and limitations is examined both in general terms, and specifically in relation to construing the university.

Part II: *Structuring the imagination*, in which ideas of the university are classified and categorised along three axes and the complexities of the task of imagining the university are anticipated.

Part III: *Forms of the imagination*, in which four different forms of the imagination are examined in relation to conceptualising the university: the ideological imagination, the dystopian imagination, the persuasive imagination and the utopian imagination.

Part IV: *Being imaginative*, in which the question of what it is to be imaginative in the university is considered through the criteria of adequacy that an imaginative idea of the university should address and satisfy. These criteria are applied to the author's idea of the ecological university.

This book is a demanding read, in which reasoned argument fuses with passion.

Barnett examines the difficulties involved in sustaining the complicated balancing act of *head in the clouds, and feet on the ground*— whether for universities themselves or for the various individuals within them – both theoretically and practically. The main theoretical framework he draws on is the critical realist philosophy developed by Roy Bhaskar. From this insightful and revealing perspective, Barnett explores the challenges to the imagination of identifying possibilities for the university at three interconnected levels of its being: the real, the actual and the empirical. He designates his own intellectual position as being one of a practical critical realism that is also imaginative. At the level of educational practice, the philosophical stringency of the text is leavened with many instantly recognisable illustrative

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vignettes of every day dilemmas of academic life, drawn from the author's own manifold and extensive experience.

At times, the text takes on a quality of effervescent brainstorming in the form of lists of possible ideas of the university. For example, the 112 definitions on pages 67–70 – some taken from the literature or building on ideas in the literature, some implicit in contemporary higher education policy and some the original ideas of the author – open up what Barnett terms 'sightings of the university' (70). These diverse ideas are classified along two axes of the imagination, depth and criticality which, when placed against each other, generate four quadrants:

- (1) superficial/endorsement
- (2) superficial/critical
- (3) deep/endorsement
- (4) deep/critical

A third axis along which imaginative ideas of the university can be plotted is that of pessimism/optimism. This additional axis is particularly significant because it highlights the way certain contemporary imaginings of the university are unduly pessimistic, while others are unduly optimistic. Barnett's commitment to developing forms of the imagination that offer glimpses of feasible possibilities uncovers a fertile conceptual clearing between these two extremes.

Together, the three axes open up a three-dimensional space for ideas of the university, represented in cube form in Figure 4.2 on page 57, which in turn yields eight kinds of imaginative conceptions of the university (62). This conceptual matrix functions as a powerful but subtle lever, opening up possibilities for unexpected juxtapositions in thought, and releasing a kaleidoscope of evaluative understandings of the university.

For Barnett, an important part of keeping his feet on the ground is to subject the plethora of ideas of the university he introduces to rigorous criteria of adequacy. In chapter 10 he sets out 10 such criteria. These standards are then applied in the following chapter to test his own imagining of the university; the new and compelling concept of the ecological university.

Barnett is alert from the outset to the potential 'ivory towers' critique of his argument, that he is not living in the real world. Rather than counter with a parrying question, what is the real world, he identifies as a core presupposition of the utopian imagination that not only is there a real world, but that different kinds of real world are available: 'Optionality is available' (133).

Running through the text in parallel to sophisticated and intricate classifications of multi-layered interpretations of the structures and value orientations of universities are references to poetry, painting and music. These allusions – to Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, Picasso, Poliakoff, Schubert and Arthur Bliss among others – helped me better to understand the experience of initial shock and then continuing surprise in suddenly seeing something very familiar in a new and unexpected way. After experiencing an alternative Gestalt, the comfort and security of the old way of perceiving will always be disturbed by the probings of a different vision.

As with each of the author's other books, *Imagining the University* prompted many questions in my own mind as I was reading. Most of all, I wondered about the qualities in listening which would be needed to attend to the range of very different voices all expressing their own imaginings of the university and its possibilities, and how those alternative perspectives might coalesce into an imaginary. I remembered the phrase 'harmony of dissonances' from the title of Riquelme's (1991) study of T.S.Eliot, whose *Four Quartets*

Barnett values for their imaginative fecundity and profundity (42). The paradox of a harmony of dissonances might constitute one element of the 'feasible utopia' which Barnett imagines (Chapter 2).

One interpretation of utopia is of an imagined state of perfection – in Jacoby's (2005) terms, a 'blueprint utopia' as opposed to an 'iconoclastic utopia'. An earlier writer on the university, John Henry Newman, wrote in another context that to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often. These words capture for me Barnett's elucidation in this book of the ideal of the university which he values, together with his realistic recognition of the difficult and continuous processes of change in thought which must be engaged in if that imagined ideal is to be realised. I think this is the essence of the *head in the clouds, and feet on the ground* stance which the author champions.

References

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- Riquelme, J. P. 1991. *Harmony of Dissonances: T. S. Eliot, Romanticism, and Imagination*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Denise Batchelor
 Institute of Education, University of London, UK
 Denise.Batchelor@ioe.ac.uk
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The right to higher education: beyond widening participation, by Penny Jane Burke, Abingdon, Routledge, 2012, 226 pp., £25.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-56824-1, £90.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-415-56824-4

The Right to Higher Education sets out to 'move from deconstructing policy discourses to a concern with re/conceptualizing higher education access and participation' (34). This is an approach that is sorely needed if we are to address the entrenched inequalities in higher education. While it can be tempting to think that the problem can be solved by relatively simple measures such as fair admissions policies, attempts to tackle other areas of educational inequality indicate otherwise. The reasons for differential participation in higher education are multi-faceted and are rooted in the wider social and economic context. Finding a solution to the problem is even more complex requiring a new approach to policy, practice and theory.

Penny Jane Burke recognises this, not only in the content of the book but also in its structure. The four sections can be read in a sequence or independently allowing the author to illustrate and theorise the interplay between policy, practice and the wider socio-economic context. The first section begins with a chapter providing a useful analysis of key government policy initiatives which will be of value to practitioners, policy makers and academics, alike. It is here that we begin to see the real complexities that underlie differential participation in higher education. Burke illustrates how policies are informed not only by competing agendas around social justice and economic competitiveness, but also hegemonic