‘Walking back to happiness’: a reappraisal of spirituality as an aspect of adult and university education

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Introduction

One of the striking features of political life and discussions around educational reform is the almost complete absence of any sensible conversation around well-being and what might make people happy. Instead much debate is formulated in terms of how education might contribute to economic growth ... . (Smith 2005:9)

Happiness and education are, properly, intimately connected. Happiness should be the aim of education, and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness. (Noddings 2003:1)

... scholarship and spirituality are intimately connected ... a better understanding of this connection could assist researchers and scholars in rising above inadequate frameworks and impoverishing assumptions for academic work. (Sullivan 2003:127).

I have begun with the three quotations above because, between them, they encapsulate the issues I want to address in looking back to the roots of adult education and their links with spirituality in order to look forward to a debate that I think urgently needs to take place within the context of university education: a context that seems to be dominated by economic discourses; diminished by ‘inadequate frameworks and impoverishing assumptions for academic work’; and devoid of ‘any sensible conversation’ about well-being and happiness.

I am an erstwhile adult educator who has subsequently attempted to integrate what I know of adult learning into professional doctoral programmes and courses for university lecturers (Hunt 2007; 2009a). This paper draws on reflections upon a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PCAP) that I currently facilitate with two colleagues. We recently undertook a preliminary analysis of themes emerging from participants’ portfolios (Hunt et al 2009) and found remarkable similarities with issues raised in Archer’s (2008) study of younger academics, including recognition that “successful”, authentic academic identities are rendered insecure, temporary and risky within regimes of performativity’ (p.392). Archer argues that the power of governance through performativity ‘lies in the ways it is not simply imposed, but is taken up internally by subjects who learn not only to perform to external audit, but also to enact a form of self-governance (a governmentality of the soul, as Rose 1990 describes it)’ (p.389).
I have been wondering about the implications of ‘governmentality’ associated with spirit for the ways in which the role of an academic might be enacted. Before I explain what I mean by that, I need to say more about the PCAP course and some of the issues it raises.

Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice
Background
The origins of this course lie in an ‘invitation’ to the Higher Education sector within a Government White Paper to introduce a programme/course ‘best suited to the institution’ for the training of new academic staff, with the expectation that ‘teaching quality’ would be the primary focus (DfES, 2003:50). In my own institution, it was agreed that the full gamut of ‘academic practice’ should be included. This encompasses four types of academic work enshrined in the contract of probationary lecturers: research; teaching; management/administration of teaching; and business/community relations.

Together with a colleague from the Graduate School of Education I have been involved in the design and ‘delivery’ of the course in all six years of its operation. The third member of our current tutor team is based in the Education Enhancement Unit (part of the central professional services of the university). The PCAP comprises two modules within a Masters degree in Education (MEd). It involves three full-day meetings in each of two terms, plus individual tutorial support. Two assessed portfolios are normally undertaken within one academic year; successful completion results in Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) as well as the award of the Certificate. From the outset we have attempted to embed principles of adult learning and critical reflective practice in the course. As the Handbook notes:

The course is founded in a model of co-operative learning that involves academics coming together to develop their professional practice through a process of sustained reflection and critique within a supportive community of peers. The tutors believe that professional academic practice can best be understood through the application of different ‘lenses’ (Brookfield 1995). The first is the lens of ‘literature’, which incorporates academic texts and policy documents as well as more popular forms of literature and information disseminated through other media. The second is the lens of participants’ perceptions of teaching, learning and the learning environment. Third is the lens of the institution itself and of colleagues within and outside of it. Finally, there is the lens of each individual’s own autobiography: this is shaped by personal and professional experiences, values and world-views.

The course is designed to facilitate exploration of the multiple perspectives made evident through these lenses within a mutually supportive and interdisciplinary group. Tutors anticipate that the study group will itself provide a unique perspective on professional academic practice as well as a safe space for reflection on, and experiment with, emerging ideas, understandings and skills. Course tutors expect to bring expert knowledge and skills to the group but also acknowledge and respect those brought and being developed by other participants. PCAP tutors act as facilitators within the group but also see themselves as learners alongside other course participants, learning from
them and with them, as well as from their own practice of teaching and facilitation.

We had originally hoped that participation in the course would be voluntary but decisions taken centrally within the university have led to a situation where new lecturers are all now expected to undertake the PCAP unless they have sufficient previous experience to enable them to apply independently for Fellowship of the HEA. Participants are therefore effectively ‘conscripts’ on the course rather than the willing volunteers one would hope to find in an adult learning setting. Successful completion is just one of several probationary ‘targets’ they have to meet in order to secure their contracts. In consequence, as a tutor, I have constantly to struggle with the balance between my personal beliefs about the nature of adult learning and my role as an employee of the university charged with ‘delivering’ not only appropriate knowledge and skills to course participants but also appropriately ‘accredited’ staff to the institution.

Observations
Similar tensions are often reflected in feedback from participants: thus, a recent anonymous evaluation elicited contradictory statements such as ‘[we should have] far fewer “reflection” sessions’ and ‘I particularly like the sessions in which discussions focused on our own experiences’. The overwhelming performativity culture of the university and associated time pressures constantly influence what we do as tutors and how participants perceive us/the course. For example, other recent evaluation comments include:

- It is difficult to balance giving enough time to the PCAP with demands of grant writing/ teaching/ research papers and students.
- [Course] seemed somewhat negative at first (e.g. in terms of comments from the other new lecturers about demands on their time esp re research) but ended much more positively.
- Given that many of the participants were here against their will, I think that on the whole the module providers have done an excellent job of providing new and relevant material that provoked helpful discussion about our roles.
- I appreciate you guys being so friendly and upbeat as it must clearly be hard work to teach a group of people who would rather be somewhere else.

Within some groups the sense of negativity at the outset feels almost tangible and it can be hard to create the ‘upbeat’ that will allow us to work together productively. Nevertheless, when I meet with participants individually in tutorials, I am constantly humbled by their genuine desire to do their job well in all its aspects. But I am also troubled by the personal toll that institutional pressures appear to be taking on many of them as they are forced to make compromises between their ideals and daily practices, and struggle to find some kind of work-life balance. (A recent staff survey showed ‘a University-wide fall in positive responses to work-life balance questions.’) In a conflation of what Wright Mills (1959:8) called ‘the public issues of social structures’ with ‘the personal troubles of milieu’, participants often indicate how institutional imperatives encroach upon their personal well-being. The following observations, reproduced (with permission) from various portfolios may help to illustrate this:
• Although my publication record is good, I am finding it difficult to maintain that record while increasing the time I spend on teaching, administration and writing research grants. One reason is the direct, personal accountability that academics have to students when teaching and to colleagues when presenting research. There is a natural desire to perform as well as possible in both arenas, but also a tendency to devote a disproportionate amount of time to teaching because of the immediate deadlines imposed by timetables, and the absence of deadlines for submitting research for publication. My teaching duties in the last year were judged by my School to require 18% of my time; the amount of time that I spent in reality was closer to one third.

• There is little guidance about how things should be done, besides observing others in the academic community. Yet there is a seemingly explicit expectation that one meets and exceeds the productivity targets set by the University, and those established by peers.

• Although I appreciate the gravity of the current economic situation, which has certainly a bearing on University policies ... I share with my colleagues worries about changes in the culture resulting in feelings of increased ‘pressure’, panic and feelings of inadequacy.

• Although critical thinking forms the essential core of academic thinking, there are certain distortions that can become unhelpful. One of these is perfectionism where there is an underlying belief that every task in academic practice has to be completed to perfection to become acceptable. [This is] the enemy of productive work. ... A vicious cycle is established where the academic is working harder and harder, but feeling progressively worse about their value as a thinker. ... When one’s academic self-esteem is low, it is harder to rest from work in the evening. ... academic practice can become simply a sequence of tasks: grant proposal, paper, lectures, exams etc and there is no time to stand back from the process and examine the big picture.

I have deliberately drawn at length on participants’ own words because they so clearly reinforce Archer’s (op.cit.) view that the identities (and self-esteem) of young academics are often ‘rendered insecure, temporary and risky within regimes of performativity’. Governmentality of the soul, it seems, has little concern for well-being or happiness.

I could, however, have chosen other comments from portfolios to illustrate what, apart from simply earning a living, seems to motivate academics to stay in a job that is increasingly defined by external audit and an apparent work-life imbalance: it can best be described as ‘intellectual love’ – and I think that takes us into the realm of governmentality associated with spirit, as I shall discuss in conclusion.

One PCAP participant, writing about her/his own student experience of university, noted:

• My passion [for my subject] was ignited as a result of the enthusiasm (‘intellectual love’, Spinoza, 1955) of the lecturing staff and their research directed teaching. ... This is in the spirit of Plutarch (c46-127AD) who wrote that ‘the mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled’.
The word ‘enthusiasm’ comes from a Greek root meaning ‘God/Creator within’. It is perhaps no coincidence, therefore, that PCAP participants frequently make reference to the ways in which their own enthusiasm for their subject drives and sustains them. For example:

- Some of the reasons why I am an academic can be found in my love to think about exciting ideas, to explore innovative lines of argument and test new methodological approaches.
- Although research, teaching and learning are all important parts of my identity, I still single out research as its most important aspect. [It] provides my underlying motivation as an academic.
- [Being an historian] ultimately gives meaning to all the roles I fulfil as an academic.

Rowland (2006:110) argues that ‘intellectual love’ of this kind drives and characterises not only enquiry into a subject (research) but also the way in which that knowledge is imparted to students (teaching). This seems to be exemplified in the following reflections:

- A major learning experience for me was that by speaking from the mind and heart, and by speaking as someone still actively learning about history, I believe I was more effective in communicating to my students what it means to practice and value history.
- I believe I appear more enthusiastic and engaged when talking about my own research area, and in my experience this increases the extent to which students engage with the material.

Having explored the relationship between her/his own research, learning and teaching, one participant drew up a list of ‘strategies and rights to enhance my own academic learning’. S/he concluded, somewhat poignantly: ‘I see the ideal academic experience as one where I am motivated primarily by a joy of learning and not a fear of failure’.

It seems to me that creating that kind of experience is precisely what good adult education has always been about. Bearing in mind the observations on, and from, the PCAP course outlined above therefore, I shall now return to the point with which I began - that looking back to the roots of adult education may help us to look forward to a debate that seems to be urgently required in the context of university education: a debate that could usefully address what governmentality associated with spirit might mean.

**Connections**

English, Fenwick and Parsons remind us that:

Adult education and training began with leaders who believed their very work was, in itself, spiritual. Our historical mentors did not separate their spiritual sides from their work. ... Somewhere in the past fifty years adult education and training have become more about teaching techniques and learning styles than about inspiration, aspiration and consecration. Separating the spiritual
from the educational might be a safer approach to practice, but it is short-
sighted in terms of human need and innate human understanding. (2003:19)

Palmer identifies a similar issue in relation to more general political discussions
about educational reform:

The question we most commonly ask is the ‘what’ question - what subjects
shall we teach?

When conversation goes a bit deeper, we ask the ‘how’ question – what
methods and techniques are required to teach well?

Occasionally, when it goes deeper still, we ask the ‘why’ question - for what
purposes and to what ends do we teach?

But seldom, if ever, do we ask the ‘who’ question – who is the self that
teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form – or deform – the way I
relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world? How can
educational institutions sustain and deepen the selfhood from which good
teaching comes? (1998:4)

Sullivan makes a similar point in relation to scholarship, noting that:

While the nature of the material one studies and the reliability of the methods
one uses are crucial, what determines the effectiveness of scholarship are the
‘inner tools’, the personal qualities, moral and spiritual, of the scholar.
(2003:127)

All of this seems very far removed from the issues that currently drive university
education – where the answer to Palmer’s ‘why’ question (for what purposes and to
what ends do we teach?) seems to be primarily to improve the position of the
institution in the ‘league tables’; where students’ learning is measured by pre-
determined ‘outcomes’; and where staff are valued in terms of the ‘targets’ they can
hit rather than the nature of their scholarship. In such circumstances, it is perhaps
not surprising that academics appear to have succumbed to a ‘governmentality of
the soul’ that allows the many harsh demands made on them to be internalised as
personal inadequacies, and therefore to go largely unchallenged.

Would governmentality associated with spirit be different? I think it would. I have
suggested elsewhere (e.g. Hunt 2009b) that the reductionist thinking embedded in
the performativity culture is symptomatic of life in a ‘clockwork universe’ – and that
this is challenged by an emerging ‘Gaian’ world-view where notions of
interconnectedness and holism, often expressed in terms of spirituality, require us to
live and work differently. I have also reported at previous conferences on issues
arising from an ESRC-funded seminar series on Researching spirituality as a
dimension of lifelong learning (RES-451-26-0008). The following comments give a
flavour of the discussions in those seminars and their impact on participants:
• I left feeling inspired to draw explicitly upon my spirituality in my teaching and my research, rather than to hide it as something not ‘valid’ in academic/professional space.

• Suddenly all the bits of my life are together in one meeting.

• We need more spaces like this where people can be open and honest, touch deeper levels.

• How do we re-establish contact with deeper levels of what it means to be a professional – express a ‘calling’ and connection with what it means to be human?

These have convinced me that many academics and others now share a felt-reality of connectedness (a Gaian world-view, whether or not that is how they would name it) and a desire to explore and enact this in their personal and professional lives. Interestingly, Palmer (1998:11) states categorically that ‘Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness’ and that the ‘complex web of connections’ they weave between themselves, their subjects and their students are held ‘in their hearts – meaning heart in its ancient sense, as a place where intellect and emotions, spirit and will converge in the human self’ (original emphasis). That, I suggest, is the place where governmentality associated with spirit arises.

Speaking of the process of ‘governmentality of the soul’, Rose (1999:vii) argues that ‘the psy disciplines and psy expertise have had a key role in constructing “governable subjects”’. This has been achieved through ‘three inextricably linked injunctions – to self-actualization, to commitment to the mundane, to ceaseless confession and solicitude’; Rose questions how they have ‘come to define the horizons of thinkability for so many?’ (p.xxv). Such horizons seem to me to be those of a clockwork universe in which, although individuals may shape one another and the intricacies of their lives, they ultimately believe themselves to be separate from one another.

Recent developments and studies in contemporary spirituality (exemplified by the recent launch of the British Association for the Study of Spirituality) suggest that the emergence of a Gaian world-view is changing our horizons and facilitating new discourses. These allow us to explore better the ‘heart-place’; the felt-reality of connections within and between ourselves and with, for want of a better term, the ‘God/Creator within’ that drives and sustains us as academics and educators in institutions where, in the words of the PCAP participant quoted above, being ‘motivated primarily by a joy of learning and not a fear of failure’ does not seem to figure on the corporate agenda.

The founders of adult education undoubtedly expressed their spirituality differently within discourses that then largely conflated understandings about spirituality and religion. Nevertheless, they understood the dynamic and holistic relationship between teachers, learners and subject knowledge, and that it cannot be separated from life in all its aspects – physical, emotional or spiritual. In his influential vision of adult education, Lindeman wrote:

A fresh hope is astir. From many quarters comes the call to a new kind of education with its initial assumption affirming that education is life - not merely preparation for an unknown kind of future living. (original emphasis; 1926:4)
I sense that a fresh hope may be astir again, emanating from the ‘heart-place’ and potentially manifesting in a new governmentality of spirit. We cannot afford to ignore what its implications might be. If education is life, and life is now, we must now engage purposefully in what Smith (op.cit.) calls a ‘sensible conversation around well-being and what might make people happy’.

References
Hunt C (2009a) “‘They pass by themselves without wondering’: Using the self in, and as, research’ in P Coare & L Cecil (eds) Really Useful Research, University of Cambridge, SCUTREA, pp.255-262.

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