



REVIEW

Time to talk about hope in higher education

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Hope is in short supply in the contemporary world. It is easy to get drawn into despair when seemingly apocalyptic challenges loom, including in higher education (HE). Some suggest there is light at the end of the tunnel but, however true that may be, it is sometimes difficult to know where the tunnel can be found in the first place. Given this, a book titled *Stories of Hope* demands our attention.

The challenges facing HE are ubiquitous. Funding has either been cut or faces ongoing threat. The function of education as a social process by which learners develop critical skills seems to be displaced in favour of 'job readiness' and employability skills. Education is increasingly valued less for its own sake and more for its instrumentality in delivering a career or simply paid employment (institutional targets frequently fail to distinguish between the two). Expert knowledge and the rigorous examination of social, scientific, and cultural phenomena are derided in favour of idiosyncratic personal experience and pronouncements from social media influencers. Added to this, AI, particularly generative AI, creates uncertainty around exactly what students are learning and what educators are assessing. HE faces huge challenges and educators need resources to allow them to respond with hope. The authors and editors of *Stories of Hope: Reimagining Education* provide such resources.

Before turning fully to this volume, it is worth recalling Terry Eagleton's (2015) *Hope Without Optimism*. Eagleton distinguishes between 'hope' and 'optimism'. Optimism, he suggests, is a disposition without real evidence that things will improve—simply the opposite of pessimism—whereas hope is grounded in action and human agency, supported by evidence and argument, and oriented towards change. Sometimes hope can emerge from pessimism, but without collapsing into blind optimism. Hope has a degree of realism that optimism cannot match. It is from this perspective that I approach *Stories of Hope*.

Stories of Hope emerged from an invitation for 'short papers that approached education from a fundamentally human and humane perspective, offering practical examples of what can be done and achieved' (p. 4). In short, it captures the essence of hope rather than optimism. It is a large volume, divided into six major sections addressing system change, technology and the future, creative curriculum design, imaginative collaboration and co-creation, approaches to revitalising the curriculum, and looking after teachers. Each part contains a variety of chapters, some adopting a big-picture perspective and some presenting case studies, with most pointing towards possible directions for change.

The first section combines macro-level reflections with more specific explorations of educational practice. We find a call for a radical rethink of how learning is managed and designed. Instead of institutions determining student programmes, students themselves might determine them by drawing from shared repositories, something made possible by an internet-connected world. It is suggested that this would invert the distribution of HE and result in it being student-led. There are calls for a move to a critical pedagogy that reorients the university towards its community, re-embedding institutions in their localities and helping repair the town-gown divide that has increasingly re-emerged after a period when it seemed to be dissipating, if not disappearing. We are also invited to re-imagine mentorship and the nature of lifelong learning journeys (personally, I prefer the idea of the educational quest given the indeterminate end of the best learning). A further recurring theme is the need to re-engage with ludic pedagogy or, put simply, bringing fun back into study and scholarship. Students know and expect HE study to be hard, so we do not need to reinforce this Calvinist message. We need to find ways to temper the pain and trepidation with a little pleasure.

Section Two outlines how HE is shaped by digital technologies and the possibilities they bring for collaborative practices. The potential of virtual reality is considered and an open-access



digital course that involves a critical rethinking of Canadian art history from a decolonial perspective is explored. The opportunities digital spaces can bring for supporting doctoral students are discussed, while telephone-based support practices at the UK's Open University are used to argue for the centrality of non-virtual and synchronous conversation.

The chapters in Section Three address curriculum design and offer alternative views to those promoted by traditional quality agendas. They invite us to think about the possibility that failure may not always be negative, that focusing on the small and seemingly insignificant can illuminate the larger picture and bring about deeper understanding. As educators we are encouraged to take risks (something that metrics and the precarious, performative nature of contemporary HE implicitly works against). There are chapters on the affective side of curriculum design and on ways of engaging with this important, if often neglected, dimension of learning and becoming (for that is what good learning does, it helps learners become anew). Again, we engage with playfulness and metaphors for helping learners (and, it must be said, teachers) understand better what they are engaged in. Alternatives to conventional modes of assessment are on display and ways of involving student-learners in the development of assessment regimes are explored. In navigating this terrain, readers move across a wide topography of disciplinary areas.

The fourth section focuses on collaboration and co-creation inviting the reader to think imaginatively about these key ideas. There are calls for increased collegiality, but a collegiality involving all learners rather than simply academics, teachers, and those undergoing research training. Techniques and philosophical approaches to such a reorientation of student-teacher relations as well as radical traditions, such as non-violence and anarchism, are drawn upon as inspirations. More recent perspectives, such as Design Thinking, make an appearance as do suggestions on how Peer-Review of Teaching can serve a more radical purpose than it is normally afforded, alongside examples of innovations in professional and staff development.

The editors of the fourth section perhaps sum up the challenge and purpose of publishing this book when they say (pp. 264–265):

One of the most difficult tasks is to imagine differently, and imagining education and its practices differently can be the most difficult of all. We are all inscribed with reductive educational narratives from nursery or kindergarten up to university, 'schooled' and 'conformed'. Yet, we believe it is possible, and necessary, to take down the hostile and impenetrable towers of Higher



Education, to tear down the watchtowers, remove the gatekeepers—and welcome people in. With our practice we endeavour to build a village of learners and educators that have equal participation and an equal say in the process of making liberatory practice a reality.

In Section Five, we are taken beyond the formal design of learning and into education, a more nuanced concept in which progress is much more difficult to assess. As is the case throughout the book, values are again at the fore, with the authors willing to wear their convictions on their sleeves. Hope is evinced by the possibility of learners and teachers claiming whatever agency the system allows them, and the recognition of personal development as a goal of learning (rather than extrinsic value of learning and the qualifications it brings).

Building on themes of collaboration/co-creation, human relationships and collaboration are emphasised as important vehicles for a humane education benefitting the whole person and helping guard against wellness challenges in contemporary HE. These are vital in settings where we are introducing new types of students from backgrounds where higher learning is not a typical life experience. In short, where we seek to widen access and participation with promises of social, personal, and (dare we say it) economic advancement, we must take account of these students' experiences and needs in the 'new-to-them' culture of HE. The development of learners' agency and capacity to apply it is also addressed in this section.

Finally, in Section Six, the focus is on those who form the audience for this book: the teachers—those who facilitate learning and development. I am loath to say that we 'deliver' learning, an all-too-common phrase in today's universities suggesting that, like waiters in a restaurant, we simply take orders and then serve whatever meal the diner (customer if you like)—has ordered. Delivering learning is a phrase born straight out of the student-as-consumer model of education, a metaphor I abhor. The section opens by asking the very reasonable question, 'If we don't look after ourselves, how can we look after others?' (p. 515). The reasons for this question will be familiar to anyone working in HE: precarity, performativity, budget constraints, instability in the political and technological environments, threats of job cuts, the rapid turnover of senior managers, a focus on employability at the cost of broader learning and development, a decline in the social status of the learning professions, and more. Indeed, the more one thinks about it, the more the observer is likely to wonder not why there is so much mental ill-health amongst educators but, rather, why are there so many mentally well educators in our ranks.



Section Six offers ways in which wellbeing can be improved and maintained, although many focus on individual ways of coping rather than pushing for systemic change. While finding ways of coping and making our day-to-day activity more enjoyable and less detrimental to our individual health is important, I have a suspicion that the more we cope, the more our managerial overseers will expect us to do. To draw on something written by another of my favourite authors, C. Wright Mills, mental health in HE has moved from being a personal issue to being a social problem. When writing about unemployment in 1959, Mills (p. 9) said:

When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals.

The same logic applies to the issue of mental wellbeing in HE and pushes us towards responses that address the structural issue rather than simply the personal trouble.

This book is a welcome contribution to the literature on learning in HE, taking us beyond the usual avenues. The reader looking for new ways of approaching their teaching and curriculum design and for ammunition to engage in arguments with more conservative colleagues will find rich pastures. The collection is strong on critique and practice but rather less so on the issue of agency, relying mostly on the power of the individual operating within their institutional constraints. The role played by power in forcing or restricting change is largely ignored. Given that many of those most likely to seek to implement the types of change being called for in the book or most likely to be influenced by the contributors' arguments are going to be those newer to the profession, it is salutary to remember that they are likely to be the least powerful members of our profession and, thus, the least likely to be able to drive change in managerial organisations.

It is also worth bearing in mind that many initiatives of the type being described here are developed, delivered, and championed by one or a small number of individuals. What happens when they move on or when other priorities take precedence? We live in an age of precarity in which many of our more innovative colleagues are employed using short-term



contracts. This precarity is exacerbated by the rapid turnover of senior managers across the sector, who usually bring with them a desire to change things to build their CVs for their application for their next position in four- or five-years' time. Their shifting priorities can impact nascent innovations. While this precarity and change, with its enforced movement of innovators, may improve the circulation of ideas, it makes it less likely that initiatives will take root firmly enough to become embedded in and beyond institutions.

Further, some of the ideas discussed in the book are not new in themselves; what is new is their rediscovery and an increased ability to deliver them through the power of technology. The technology being used, however, is increasingly owned by wealth-seeking investors whose aim is to monetise innovation once users have been brought on board. Grants to trial and establish innovations rarely provide ongoing funding, and the HE landscape is replete with the wrecks of abandoned initiatives. Institutions move on, with the remains of innovation left behind, forgotten in the desert like *Ozymandias* awaiting rediscovery by a latter-day Shelley.

That said, one of the strengths of this collection is its focus on values—individual, societal, and institutional—and the way we can place them at the centre of our practice and how that placement might work to transform the experience of both learners and teachers. Values are powerful, especially when they are held collectively. This book reminds us that we lose sight of that fact at our peril.

Finally, I must note that the book is dedicated to Tom Burns who is one of the co-editors and contributors and who, despite his untimely death, remains a leading light in the field of Learning Development. In the introduction to Section Three, Tom and his co-authors reflect that 'Hope here is not a naive optimism or an abstract ideal. It is positioned as a grounded, intentional, and relational practice ... hope becomes a strategy of resistance and renewal' (p. 159). The book was conceived with the desire that it would start a conversation ... '[a conversation that] could lead to positive changes and provide hope for the future' (p. 3). For this writer at least, it has succeeded, and I hope it will do the same for other readers.

Disclosure statement

The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.



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