Spirituality and the university

The problem of learning outcomes

Stephen Loftus

Introduction
Most people would accept that the experience of higher education might have an effect on an individual’s spirituality. The question arises as to what that effect might be and is it possible to judge it in some way? Because of the deeply personal nature of spiritual experience it may always be inappropriate to think of formally assessing someone’s spirituality with the grades and marks typical of assignments in higher education. However, it is possible to critique what people say and do based on their spirituality. What they say and do might demonstrably change because of the higher education experience. In other words, we can ask how is spirituality articulated? How

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is it practised? How do people express the relationship between a personal spiritual realm and the outside world? How do all these change through the experience of education? Conversely, our spirituality can be expected to shape what it is that we bring to the experience of higher education in important ways. Therefore, it is useful to think of this relationship as dialogical. This is relevant not only to those who might study subjects such as theology and who can be assumed to have a professional interest in the issue. It applies to everybody who aspires to some form of spiritual life, no matter what discipline they study. These reflections are informed by the work of Gadamer and Bakhtin with their emphasis on the dialogicality of human experience. The examples used are mostly drawn from the world of medical education simply because they reflect the background of the author, but they are widely applicable.

**Dialogism**
A dialogical approach to considering relationships of any sort is a central part of the work of Bakhtin. Bakhtin introduced the concept of dialogism (although he did not use this term), which is essentially a pragmatic form of epistemology. The aim of dialogism is to understand human behaviour through the use people make of language. In Bakhtin's view, dialogue is central to language and central to human identity. Reality is experienced through dialogue and not just perceived through the senses. Dialogism has, therefore, a distinctive phenomenological element to it. With the dialogical approach, human identity and consciousness is always defined in terms of its relation to the 'other'. Even when we are thinking alone we are in dialogue with ourselves and using ideas that came from others. For Bakhtin, the concept of dialogue was much richer than that of dialectics, of which he had a low opinion.

Dialogue and dialectics. Take a dialogue and remove the voices (the partitioning of voices), remove the intonations (emotional and individualizing ones), carve out abstract concepts and judgments from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness – and that's how you get dialectics.

It is an assumption of dialectics that much of reality comes in binary opposites that are synthesised. Bakhtin decried this as too simplistic,
rejecting the sense of closure that dialectical synthesis implies. According to Bakhtin, dialogue is multivocal and never reaches completion, in the sense that there is no end to the meaning that can be derived from dialogue as human interaction. All the interpretations we can make of an issue might be stated now, but other interpretations will be possible in the future and other valid interpretations were possible in the past. In the Bakhtinian world view there is no end to interpretation. Dialogism, therefore, has a strong hermeneutic element with an emphasis on meaning being derived from dynamic social relations. From a Bakhtinian position it is the relationship between things that is of primary interest. The 'things' in question, whether they be individual humans, a person reading a text or institutions interacting, derive their meaning from the relations, the intersubjectivity, that exists between them.

Gadamer’s work is reminiscent of Bakhtin’s work on dialogicality, and of Wittgenstein’s work on language games. Gadamer was certainly aware of Wittgenstein’s work, referring to him extensively in *Truth and Method*. It can be argued that Wittgenstein’s *forms of life* and their corresponding *language games* have much in common with Gadamer’s *tradition*. Gadamer developed Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology, and Gadamer’s philosophy is often referred to as philosophical hermeneutics. The hermeneutics developed by Heidegger and Gadamer, casts hermeneutics as central to human experience and what it means to be human. Interpretation of the law is sometimes given as an example of this position on hermeneutics. Interpretation of the law inevitably transforms the law and those involved in its interpretation.

In Gadamer’s magnum opus one of his aims was to establish the linguistic character of human reality itself. According to Gadamer, hermeneutics was at the centre of modern philosophical problems, such as the ‘relationship of language to being, understanding, history, existence, and reality’.

Gadamer’s philosophy is also very much a hermeneutics of dialogue. People enter into a dialogue with the text or text analogue, which they wish to understand. Each person has a ‘horizon of understanding’ which comes from their experience of the world and the culture in which they live. Gadamer spoke of *tradition* to denote this, and said that *tradition* gives people a set of prejudgments (or prejudices) which they bring to any event of understanding. It is the prejudgments that inform the questions
we ask and what we can accept as possible answers. Husserl\textsuperscript{10} claimed that in undertaking a phenomenological study it is important to 'bracket' or set aside such prejudegaments. Gadamer was of the opinion that this was not possible, but that it was important to try to identify the prejudices that we bring to any act of understanding so that they can be taken into account. An act of understanding can be a complex dialogue, as one may have to move between the parts of the phenomenon in order to understand the whole, and study the whole in order to understand the parts until there is the dialogical fusion of horizons. If we are sufficiently open to the meaning that a text has for us it can be consciously integrated with our prejudices, presumably transforming them in the process. Our horizon of understanding is thus fused with the horizon of what we seek to understand.

A dialogical approach can also change our way of thinking about spirituality itself. It is conventional to think of our spiritual lives as intensely and deeply personal and internal to ourselves. However, a more dialogical approach 'seeks to recognize a world that is not within persons but within their relationships'.\textsuperscript{11} This does not mean abandoning the idea of an internal world but to refocus on relationships as being far more interesting.

**Learning Outcomes**

The dialogical outlook, therefore, provides us with a position from which we can think through the possible learning outcomes of higher education and their relationship to someone's spiritual life. In recent years there has been a great deal of interest within higher education on exactly what it is that higher education should be achieving.\textsuperscript{12} In what ways should graduates be different from those just beginning their studies? This is the issue of learning outcomes. Learning outcomes is in many ways a highly contentious issue because of the different philosophies that have been used to conceptualise what the business of higher education is all about. For example, a technical rational approach to education conceptualises learning in essentially mechanistic terms whereas a more interpretive approach sees learning as involving ontological changes just as much as epistemological. The dialogical view, outlined above, is firmly within the ontological camp. The differences between the two positions can be seen in the kind of questions they would ask of higher education. A technical rational approach might ask: what does someone need to know in order to
do the job of theologian/scientist/doctor/pastor? The ontological version of this question would be: what does someone need to know in order to be a theologian/scientist/doctor/pastor? These are fundamentally different questions despite the superficial similarities. However, there is some agreement about what learning outcomes should be achieved, even if these are articulated differently within the different discourses. There is a number of major learning outcomes that many people would now agree are of first importance in any discipline. The first is criticality.

Consider the following (apocryphal) story of medical students hearing their very first lecture from the dean on their very first day at medical school. The dean starts off by saying all the things you would normally expect. He welcomes all the new students, and congratulates them all on getting into medical school and warns them that, although they had worked very hard to get into medical school, they would need to work even harder to get out, especially if they wanted to get out with a medical degree. Then he says something that the medical students find quite shocking. He says,

over the next few years you are going to have to learn a great deal of information, but we now realise that half of what we will teach you is wrong, and the real problem is that we have no idea which half that is!

On reflection, it is clear that the dean was a very wise man indeed. He was, of course, exaggerating, but there was a lot of truth in what he said. For example, not long ago it was the accepted wisdom that stomach ulcers were caused by stress. This was widely taken as a fact and a great deal of medical and surgical care was based on this so-called fact. It was only in recent years that two Australian doctors discovered that stomach ulcers are caused by an infection. What happened? The medical establishment largely ignored the newcomers. Why? Because everybody knew that stomach ulcers were caused by stress. The medical profession had effectively closed its collective mind. There was no criticality. Fortunately, the two Australians were persistent and produced more and more evidence to support their idea and eventually the medical profession accepted that stomach ulcers are caused by infection. There are many more similar examples. The dean of the medical school wanted to make the following important points. The first is that he was trying to encourage the students to become lifelong learners who would continue educating themselves for
the rest of their professional lives but, more fundamentally, he was trying to encourage them to question, and to question everything. In other words, he was prompting them to adopt a critical attitude from the first day and become critical practitioners.

All our graduates should be comfortable living and working with critical analysis and critical reflection. A second major learning outcome is closely related and this is a willingness to live and work with uncertainty, being comfortable with a world that is not always black and white but has a lot of grey in it. This is probably true of all disciplines. We realise now that it is certainly true of the professions. Many medical students are often surprised to find out how much doubt and uncertainty there can be in medical practice. There is an assumption that because medicine is underpinned by science then it must deal with certainties, but the reality of professional medical practice is quite different. Where there is doubt and uncertainty there is a need for criticality. Decisions have to be made where there is often insufficient information for certainty. Sometimes decisions have to be made when there is conflicting information. Conflicting information and gaps in information all need to be critically evaluated. Medical practitioners have always made decisions under doubt and uncertainty, but without being fully aware that they were doing so. The medical profession is now slowly waking up to the need for doctors to actively learn criticality. For example, in some research I did recently, one supervisor of GP registrars discussed the teaching sessions he ran, and at one point said:

So we have those little discussions about “yes, this is what they have on the list but how relevant is it”? So we allow that adult input where they can sit around and say “this sounds like rubbish, why would you do that?” And I agree. Rather than saying “that’s the list, learn it, do it”.

In other words, by allowing ‘adult input’ he was encouraging critical thinking in the young doctors he was supervising and prompting them not to simply accept what they were given.

This point may raise particular challenges for some involved in the study of scripture or theology. Many religious organisations, many denominations, certainly want potential ministers and others to become better educated and acquire a university level degree. However, what many of them really want is for their students to learn more about the orthodoxy
those organisations stand for, and simply become better informed about this orthodoxy, so that they can pass it on to others more effectively. The challenge is that there is a difference and a tension between simply learning more information and critically analysing that same information. People who learn to analyse critically may end up asking some very awkward questions. They may begin to entertain serious doubts about their faith or end up rejecting the things the orthodox view holds dear. How far do we want to encourage criticality? How much doubt do we want our people to live with? How much doubt is our church or denomination prepared to live with?

It is clear that some professional religious people are not prepared to live with any doubt at all. There are well-known stories of famous contemporary evangelists who have made a deliberate decision never to doubt. To some this is simply appalling. The refusal to doubt could even be seen as a denial of one's own humanity. From this viewpoint, our abilities to doubt, to question, and to think are God-given abilities we are meant to use in order to establish and enrich the dialogical relationships that make up our lives. We can use doubt to our advantage to ask important questions. The playwright, John Patrick Shanley, once wrote a play called *Doubt* in which he argued that doubt can be as powerful and sustaining as certainty.

Doubt and faith are not necessarily contradictory. There can be a healthy dialogical relationship between faith and doubt where each is kept in balance with the other. It can be argued that the job of higher education should be to help us learn how to balance the two in a rigorous and systematic way. There is a risk that doubt may overcome faith, but is it preferable to never engage with doubt? It can also be argued that there is no real escape from doubt. It is part of the human condition. Trying to remove doubt all together can be seen as a very unhealthy attitude. It also seems to be symptomatic of a wider anti-intellectualism that characterises some Christian denominations.

This anti-intellectualism has embarrassing results such as the creationism debate. This is one important reason why rigorous education of any sort is so important for those who are interested in improving the quality of religious or spiritual life. Good education can help us to see what is really important in our world, both material and spiritual, and not be distracted by what is unimportant. The creationist debate (or its successor intelligent design) is a vivid example of what is very unimportant.
Creationism seems to be a problem that is peculiarly American, and the reasons seem to be largely educational. The infamous Scopes trial, in the 1920s, frightened American educators so much that many of them decided to avoid trouble by simply leaving evolution off the curriculum. The result was that several generations of Americans have grown up who are largely ignorant of evolution. The American establishment is paying the price for its ignorance now with extensive and expensive court cases about education in which the Christian camp has appeared at best, naïve, and at worst, duplicitous and dishonest. Elsewhere in the world, millions of Christians have grown up who are entirely comfortable with evolution and see no conflict with their faith. For many Christians the whole creationist debate is deeply embarrassing. It is essentially a non-issue. It is symptomatic of a childish spirituality that a good education could have prevented from happening.

Christianity encourages us to have a spirituality that is, in some ways, simple and childlike. However, there is a world of difference between a faith that is simple and childlike and a faith that is simplistic and childish. This is where academic education can really help our spirituality. Encouraging people to adopt a questioning and critical attitude to their faith can give intellectual depth to spiritual experience. Education can also help us to articulate our faith in ways that can help us to make it more meaningful. The ability to articulate and express ourselves is yet another important learning outcome.

I can remember as a seventeen year old reading one of the great spiritual Christian classics, the fourteenth-century The Cloud of Unknowing.\textsuperscript{13} I was fascinated and I started reading other mystical works, not only from the Christian mystical tradition, but works from the other major world religions. All the writers were striving to articulate an experience of God, in order to share this with other people. What struck me was that the major problem the writers all seemed to agonise over was the inadequacy of their attempts to articulate their experience. It was as if having made a statement they wanted to retract it immediately because they felt the statement could be misleading. However, there seems to be a widespread need for many people to try and articulate their faith for their own benefit and the benefit of others. A learning outcome of education should be a rich vocabulary that we know how use so that we can try and articulate our experience.
While trying to articulate a personal experience of God may be difficult in the extreme, we now realise that trying to articulate any experience of any kind can be problematic. Consider the following statement from Goodman:

If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described. Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than of a world.\textsuperscript{14}

Goodman's insight is perceptive, and what he says about the world includes religious experience. Religious experience may need to be articulated and shared but it must be done through particular frames of reference, and these frames of reference are human tools. Even if we believe that the frame of reference was originally God-given we still have to interpret it and our interpretations need to be critically questioned. Learning how to question, learning how to interpret, learning how to critique our frames of reference are learning outcomes that university courses should be aiming to foster in all graduates.

Gadamer's tradition is largely synonymous with Goodman's frames of reference. Tradition includes the practices, the culture, the attitudes, the preconceptions and the assumptions we bring to any act of interpretation. Gadamer was of the opinion that there can be no act of understanding that is entirely free of preconceptions and assumptions. It may not be possible to entirely articulate or eradicate our prejudices. The best we can hope for is a dialogue (with texts or other people or with scripture) in which our prejudices can be questioned. When we engage with a text, we not only question the text but, in a sense, we also allow it to question us.

This requires a willingness to be vulnerable, a willingness to live with uncertainty, a willingness to live with doubt. The result is not hard, objective understanding but a shared understanding that Gadamer referred to as a fusion of horizons. What is seen to be valuable and valid is kept and the result is a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. All too often, university courses encourage people to adopt a univocal and objective view of knowledge where knowledge is tamed and forced to fit within our pre-existing worldview. A Gadamerian view permits the
co-existence of different voices and encourages us to be questioned and challenged with the chance that our worldview may become more mature. MacIntyre\textsuperscript{15} claimed that tradition is always being contested and always being reinterpreted. There is a strong dialogical relationship between tradition and practice.

We can think of faith or professional communities as communities of practice.\textsuperscript{16} Such communities have traditions in the Gadamerian sense. Our practice, as a person of faith or as a professional practitioner of some sort, is a living tradition of conduct, which evolves and changes.

What people do within a practice, their activities, and the language they talk are intelligible only by reference to (a) their own understandings of what they are doing and (b) the tradition of conduct of which they are a part.\textsuperscript{17}

Individuals may decide what to do but the tradition provides the ways of seeing and doing. Traditions provide us with 'master narratives' which we can use to decide how to interpret the world and how to act in it.

A closely related and useful way to think about all this is in terms of narrative. From this viewpoint the major outcome of university education is learning the stories of your discipline and how to critique them and how to question them. In other words, our education should teach us how to engage in meaningful dialogue with the narratives of our discipline. Even science can be seen in such terms. The study of physics is partly about learning the stories that physicists tell of the world around us, and partly about learning how to engage in a dialogue with those same stories. The greatest physicists have always appreciated this. For example, Heisenberg, the founder of quantum physics, once said: 'Natural science does not simply describe and explain nature; it is a part of the interplay between nature and ourselves; it describes nature as exposed to our method of questioning.'\textsuperscript{18}

A willingness of our students to join in a sophisticated interplay with the stories of their chosen discipline, and to know that this is what they are doing, is another way of saying that dialogical ability is an important learning outcome of university education.

\textbf{Spirituality, education and dialogue}

How does all this relate to spirituality? Gadamer's and Bakhtin's views about dialogical relations can help us to develop a deeper spirituality. All
too often, spirituality can come across as stridently univocal. The only voice heard seems to be that of tradition. A healthy dialogical relationship can include a number of voices. There will be the voice of our tradition, hopefully the voice of God, but there must also be our own voice. Appreciating and being willing to attend to many voices can help us to grow spiritually – provided that the attention paid to all the voices is a critical attention.

From Gadamer we can take the point that it is important to realise the power of our language and our traditions to shape the ways we make sense of our relationships with God. For example, in the Christian tradition we are often encouraged to think of God as a father figure. However, we need to understand that whatever God is, he/she/it is far beyond being a father or anything else that we can ever hope to capture in our language. This applies to all the things we can say or write about God. Language, not even sacred scripture, can ever fully capture the divine. We cannot fully define God. If a university education can teach us the limits of our language then perhaps this can help us to develop a spirituality that is more at ease with a God who will always be ineffable.

The relationship between spirituality and university education can be thought of as a dialogical relationship. This means that one informs the other. Our spirituality can inform what happens in the university. We can hope to see more of this in the future. There is a growing interest in the notion of curriculum. Curriculum is not the same as syllabus. Syllabus is simply the content taught on a course. Curriculum relates to the whole experience of undertaking a university education. In the field of medical education, it is now realised that when a new curriculum is designed it is important to begin, not with the content, but with articulating the values that underpin the profession, and the values that the educators bring to the exercise. Any curriculum is based on a set of values and the curriculum is shaped by those values. If we have any kind of spiritual life then presumably that spirituality will influence the values we bring to the business of higher education? This is why it is so important to develop the language and vocabulary that can enable us to articulate what those values are.

The relationship between spirituality and education is a delicate one. We cannot educate people into having spiritual experience. All we can do is help them make sense of the experience once they start to have it. I think the spiritual experience comes first, based on my own experience. I was educated in a Jesuit school, and began to question my faith in my
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