Universiteit Utrecht

Onderwijsparade, 3 maart 2016

Keynote-lezing door James Kennedy

An Educated Guess

James Kennedy

It is a great privilege to address you today. I do so, though, with great trepidation and humility, especially realizing how many of you have dedicated your lives and your talents to the education of our students. As for myself, especially in this medieval setting, I feel a bit like Dante the Pilgrim in the Divine Comedy as expressed in its famous first line: 'In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost'. My motivation to enter into this profession was to teach – in the first, second and third place. Gradually, though, I found myself doing less and less of it, focusing more and more on other opportunities and responsibilities, including research (which I experienced as enabling my teaching but also in practice in partial tension with it), administration as a well as a host of other activities outside of the university. Today I am myself, and perhaps like many of you, a seeker, looking to make 'educated guesses' about how we can, to the best of our insights and abilities, educate, that is, to 'lead forth' and to 'draw out', students for their work in the world.

That task, as you know, is not easy. As fundamental as teaching and learning are to the life and the purpose of the university, we often suspect that that they are not as central to the mission of universities as they ought to be. In fact, universities are often places where only quite 'limited learning' takes place, to cite Arum's and Roksa's research of American universities in their book *Academically Adrift* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). They paint a highly critical picture of a university system in which virtually all actors had reasons for not pushing learning processes further. Students in the United States seek to 'acquire the greatest exchange value (a degree) for the smallest investment in time and money.' Academic staff preferably spend their time pursuing their own research and other professional interests, and administrators are focused on finances and university reputation. Government agencies chiefly find the university interesting as a place where new scientific knowledge is generated. Good teaching could still make a difference, Arum and Roksa found out, but it did not happen to the extent to relieve their generally somber picture. Though their findings are controversial – some critics point to evidence that critical thinking skills really do improve in college - and not necessarily applicable in all respects to the European situation, it seems to me clear enough that there are structural patterns in place that gravitate against the kind of teaching from which both 'excellent' and 'average' students would benefit most.

Despite such assessments, there is of course much good that has happened with education in the university. More than in the recent past teaching has been recognized as important. And for over twenty years this university has worked hard to improve the quality of its education and to emphasize the importance of this education. Commitment to the quality of university teaching as a point of policy was still something of a countercultural stance in the 1990s; it no longer is. We know that from the professoriate at this university on the basis of surveys that their estimation of teaching and its importance has risen significantly in recent years. Moreover, the Center of Excellent in University Teaching (CEUT) has empowered many teachers to learn from each other, enhancing their teaching in the process.

And yet there are limits to these positive developments. The problem is not only, or perhaps even chiefly, the proverbial precedence of research over teaching in the effective hierarchies of the university, which leave a good many teachers systematically undervalued despite some modest efforts to reverse this. It lies in at least two other developments that I see at this university. The first is that educational programs – more than ever – have been subjected to tighter controls, controls incidentally mostly meant to improve the quality of education and to guarantee some kind of public accountability for educational 'product.' That education be well-managed, coherent, transparent and indeed accountable have been increasingly important concerns. This raises the real possibility that the dimensions of teaching – not easily subject to the rules of accountability because too 'subjective' to be so evaluated – have possibly stagnated for lack of encouragement, because these aspects do not fit into what is formally required of us as a university. In short, educational programs seem to be much more about creating coherent curricula and measureable outcomes than about creating room for developing the hearts and minds of our students (to paraphrase Ken Bain in *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Harvard University Press, 2004)).

And the second related issue is that this university still does not interact sufficiently with the wider world. I am aware that some important initiatives have been undertaken – I am somewhat familiar – and charmed- with the *wetenschapsknooppunt* that connects UU students with local schools. But the centrality of connecting *teaching* to a wider public task has not been systematized. Research has been making a turn to pay more attention to 'societal impact', but the educational wing of the university arguably has lagged behind, in part, I think, because of deep ambivalence in the academy about whether such an aim is properly part of the university's teaching mission. It seems more sensible and perhaps safer to define 'learning outcomes' according to more ostensibly measureable academic criteria.

I sense that there is a growing discomfort with this tightly circumscribed educational system, as the protests at my former employer the Universiteit van Amsterdam illustrate. After years of increased emphasis on accountability and '*rendementen*' there is some willingness to ponder, certainly also at this university, whether all of this has gone too far, and that we should be 'let go' a bit, loosen the reins as it were, when it comes to education. This emerging reflection should not, however, be restricted to questions whether particular rules should be relaxed or particular 'learning outcomes' broadened or abandoned. Much of the problem we face is deeper. Our assumptions about teaching are premised on the idea that 'learning' is not only to be effectively measured but is also to be guaranteed – at least as long as certain well-defined processes are set into motion and certain outcomes can be demonstrated. But it is very much the question whether this is the case. Inspired by Gert Biesta (whose recent *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Taylor & Amp, Francis, 2013)is often the source of insight in my presentation today), I tend to think that learning, by students or anyone else, is not a given. Teaching, moreover, as William James once argued, is an art – not a science – with often wonderful and many times unforeseen results. And because it is an art education at the same time carries attendant 'risks' that therefore carries in it the very real possibilities of failure, of *not* being able to lead forth, of *not* being able to draw out, or from the student's view, of not being lead forth or not being drawn out. Teaching and learning are dialogical processes subject to radically different 'outcomes' (if I dare use the word), even between good students and good teachers. Biesta reminds us in a deeply human endeavor such as education that 'input' will never totally correlate to 'output.' Something like 'evidenced-based' teaching still needs to take account of millions of different contexts in which only the art of the teacher can hope to find paths forward. I think that this is an important and humbling insight for everyone – for the Ministry of Education, for university administrators and not least for teachers themselves, who always have to recognize that the ability to teach is not something that is always given to them.

So there are compelling reasons why 'letting go' and leaving room for the 'educated guess' might actually prove beneficial to the way we further develop our own thoughts and practices about education. It seems to me that there are two ways to bring us to a better place, though they might be in partial – but perhaps also creative – tension with each other.

The first requires considerable attention to, and giving room to student engagement. 'Contemporary higher education no longer engages the heart,' writes Tim Clydesdale of the College of New Jersey in *The Purposeful Graduate* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), while active learning really requires 'existential engagement' (as Mark William Roche of the University of Notre Dame argues in *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005)) that links inner concern and passions of the students with the needs of the world. That's not always easy to accommodate. Sometimes students don't either know how their studies relate to their commitments, or they do not seem to care how they might be. A majority of American students seeks a degree in higher education to relate to a 'higher' purpose of their lives, but that percentage is down from a generation ago. And of course the research university itself feels ambivalent about matters of 'existential engagement' or of linking university teaching to 'social responsibility' (which Andrew Delbanco of Columbia University (in *College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be,* Princeton University Press, 2012) sees as one of the main aims of a university education). If 'existential engagement' is restricted to possessing a love for specialized research, then we all feel quite comfortable; this is, after all, exactly *Wissenschaft als Beruf* as Max Weber articulated it. But necessarily tying that deep love of research, as crucial as it is, with a wider mission, of concern for the world, is much more difficult. Few at the university, to be sure, want to produce merely amoral technocrats, though there remain a significant number of academicians who do think, like the American literary theorist Stanley Fish, that students should 'save the world on their own time' (*Save the World on your own Time,* Oxford University Press, 2012). I think it is more common that many academicians are just uncertain about to what extent they should undertake it and perhaps just how they might. Added to this hesitancy perhaps is a pious hope that a wider social or moral engagement of students will take care of itself. It may – but it also might not.

To address this problem there have been important initiatives to put a new emphasis on student motivation. This has taken many forms. One such initiative are 'learner-led' programs that seek to put students more in 'control' of their own learning processes by given much more room for them to design, at least to some extent, their own courses and program of study. In this way they can identify their own interests and their own set of concerns. This is just one approach; there are others, of course. The humanities program at this university, including University College Utrecht, work with portfolios which ask students to reflect on what they learned and how this might relate to the wider world. I think this kind of reflection is *very* important, although I am still looking for the proper form. I observe sometimes that compulsory written reflections that by their nature cannot be graded can be deadening for both teacher and student unless both happen to be 'in the mood' or are eager to engage in such exercises. Maybe we can find ways to do this that are less bureaucratic and less prone to a going-through-the-motions mentality that is the exact antithesis of real reflection.

However we may think of portfolios, reflection does matter. It might be worth mentioning that years ago when I was working in the United States I was part of a team that received a large grant to develop 'purpose exploration programming' for the students at our college, in which students could sign up for a range of programs to discover their passions and tie it in with their curriculum and their further aims. In this way they could, as one source puts it, 'thoughtfully calibrate their life trajectories during their college years' and develop a 'grounded idealism' (Clydesdale, *The Purposeful Graduate*). Such projects continue to be financed in many U.S. colleges and universities; one of them has developed select programs that foster (in two separate initiatives) 'urban engagement' and 'leadership development.' Although diverse in ambition and scale, all really are about stimulating thoughtful discernment among students about the future lives, and linking that with exploratory actions on their parts. Though not everyone who goes through such programs finds it rewarding, many do, and those who have a stronger sense of meaning and purpose in their lives than those who did not.

In various ways, universities have come to recognize the importance of the internal motivations of students. Our university certainly has, seeking as it now does to heighten 'student engagement' in all faculties, which sometimes has included the creation of co-curricular 'communities' in which students and teachers can explore wider themes and issues in ways that enhance a student sense of embeddedness, and of engagement in their own studies, apparently with some success. And this letting go can be quite far-reaching at University College Utrecht; the course molecular cell biology, under direction of Johannes Boonstra and Fred Wiegant, chiefly consists in allowing students to write their own high-caliber research proposal, compelling to do their own original research to make this possible. The expertise of the instructors is critical in several ways for this approach to work, but it is a great example of how teachers can *trust* students to find their own way to achieving a very high standard of work.

A particular focus of my own is to find ways of enhancing civic engagement among my own students, not just only in doing good for the community (as laudatory as that is) but as a way to link their own academic interests with wider needs. In the United States, 'service-learning' projects have been established in hundreds of universities, which links course work with partnerships in civil society and with government to achieve some public good, all the while giving room for students to become further motivated by their contacts outside the 'ivory tower'. It is something I would like to see more of here, though it already has its analogs here.

Seen this way, helping students deepen their own internal motivations for studies is a crucial way for enabling us to let go. If we can trust more in their own motivations and their own drives then perhaps we can permit ourselves to do less box-checking – all the while keeping in mind that deep forms of participation will also carry risks. One of the tasks here today, then, is to think about how we can create the conditions for students to explore their own motivations and the kinds of letting go that such endeavors might entail. Some of my concerns would be that such plans would not really substantially change the way that the university works, that is, that student engagement is fine as long as it fits within the existing imperatives and structures of the university. And universities, being deeply conservative institutions, are going to want to do that.

And there's another concern, too, and this brings me to my second point: that to the extent that we open things up to students we actually might help shut things down. Biesta, himself an inveterate critic of the neo-liberal developments in education, rightly insists that students are not, should not be seen as, 'consumers whose needs need to be met' (Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, at p. 57) – an important critique that we should always use to measure our own motivations for improving education at this university. He is also critical, as I also happened to be in a 2004 address (which after many years I looked up to prepare for today), of the teacher (merely) as 'coach' or as 'facilitator' who may or may not be important to the learning process, and where 'learner-led education' is the dominant model (see Iversen, Pedersen, Krogh & Jensen, 'Learning, Leading, and Letting Go of Control'; http://sgo.sagepub.com/content/5/4/-2158244015608423). Biesta's critical stance toward a learning-based philosophy as opposed to a teaching-based one is partially based on the insight that too much emphasis on 'learning' can promote pedagogical solipsism in which a student only can learn from what s/he gets out of herself or himself, rather than seeing learning as an adventure in which one opens oneself up to deeper ambitions, wider perspectives and interest in the insights of the teacher. He has been a firm proponent of 'giving teaching back to education,' and that real education requires an openness from students to new insights from 'outside.' For him, 'being taught' - and not 'learning from' - is essential to education (Biesta, The Beautiful Risk of Education, at pp. 44-52).

That teachers still matter for university learning was revealed by a poll held last year by Gallup in the United States. Only a small minority of students (one in seven) recalls university as a seminal experience, but those who did, felt more satisfied not only about their work but about their lives. At the very top of the list of factors that made all the difference was the experience of a teacher that made a student excited about learning; it also made a difference to many students if there was a teacher who cared about them, or was willing to serve as their mentor. A third factor – a long-term/semester-long (research) project was also important to many students. In short, if you actually had some or all of these experiences as a student – care, mentoring, guidance in a big project – you were much more likely to think more highly about where you have wound up. Whatever the reasons for this pattern, it is clear that teachers matter. Interestingly, it didn't seem to matter very much what kind of *school* students went to, whether big-name or less celebrated institutions, liberal arts colleges or large state universities. It was the relationship with the teacher that was decisive. To put it more strongly, it is about the ability of the teacher to engage her or his students, so that they may experience the university as a seminal, transformative experience ('Life in College Matters for Life After College' http://www.gallup.com/poll/168848/life-college-matters-life-college.aspx) .

It is, I would stress, not the teacher as omniscient and authoritative being that is being smuggled back into the equation, but a teacher who knows that education is a risk; a risk that requires perhaps more than anything creating the optimal kind of pedagogical ethos. That ethos, in my mind, must be one that affirms the kind of virtues that are essential for academic work. These virtues include, amongst others, a self-critical stance to what is learned and taught. This self-critical stance disciplines ourselves to grapple with material that goes against what we would rather see, or at times simply seems tedious. So, without creating an ethos in which such attitudes and dispositions, such as self-discipline and hard work but also curiosity and openness to new perspectives are instilled, scholarly and scientific endeavor would come to a standstill. Additionally, though, this ethos includes a strong invitation to link the intrinsic motivations of students to the academic work that lies ahead. That may mean a 'culture of care' as Meindert Flikkema at the Vrije Universiteit has argued, in which all teaching must be deeply mindful of the human relationships that form the essence of the teaching-learning process.

For myself, I have been most inspired by the idea of Leon Kass of the University of Chicago who saw 'thoughtfulness' as the aim of a university education. For him, such education was 'the cultivation in each of us of the disposition actively to seek the truth and to make the truth our own. More simply, liberal education is education in and for thoughtfulness. It awakens, encourages, and renders habitual thoughtful reflection about weighty human concerns…' – in whatever discipline, it might be added (Kass cited in Michael Hickerson, 'Thoughtfulness as the Aim of Liberal Education?' http://blog.emergingscholars.org-/2010/08/thoughtful-as-the-aim-of-liberal-education/).

It's worth thinking about 'thoughtfulness' as key to several different ideals of the university. It is a key virtue for friendship, and the recently-retired provost of Valparaiso University, Mark Schwehn, has opined that 'academies at their best can and should become communities where the pleasures of friendship and the rigors of work are united' (Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden*, Oxford University Press, 2005, at p. 61). But thoughtfulness as a key quality of academic life does other things as well. It offers room for reflection so necessary a companion to the restless drives of our students. It is moreover a reminder of Michael Oakeshott's claim that university education is 'liberal', in that the university is a place of learning, and of being taught, where we do not have to have concerns about the instrumental value of what is learned, or what has been taught.

Attempting to live out the right kinds of dispositions, helping to stimulate an ethos that optimally serves students, and make all of this integral to everyday teaching, is, though, not a path to certain pedagogical triumph, but an error-prone search. To be sure, awareness of, and experience in, particular teaching techniques can be useful means to our aims. But in the end, teaching remains, and must remain, an educated guess. That is why it is all the more important to heed Biesta's call to give more room to the teacher as professional, to permit him or her, as he puts it, to become 'educationally wise.' He argues for a kind of 'virtuosity' in teaching that places emphasis on the wider formation of the teacher, on the freedom to develop teaching practices of one's own, to develop through experience one's own virtuosity and the key role of mentorship in inspiring the teacher further along. Seen from this perspective, the art of teaching as acquired wisdom rather than as the master of technique, or the guarantor of results, is what is critical.

'Letting go' means, then, two things. It means that the organization must let go, in that it relents more in letting the professional teacher develop her or his own virtuosity. But it also means that the teacher herself must let go, and understands that teaching is at heart a 'risky' venture, that it is good and necessary that it is – and that letting go of control may make more things to happen than before.

The emphasis that I have placed here on two facets – the critical importance of intrinsic student motivation and the freedom of the teacher to teach – can be in tension with each other. But they are also related. They are related to each other in the more superficial sense that they both challenge an educational system that, all professions and good intentions aside, is not yet sufficiently invested in either. But they are also bound up in the question of what education actually is for. For both student and for teachers, it must mean more than jumping through the hoops of a disciplinary study. It requires a deeper, more ambitious engagement with the material and a deeper sense of personal calling that can only be fostered in a particular kind of community, where teaching really is considered the most important thing we do at the university and where the motivations of students are, to the fullest extent possible, both encouraged and challenged. What the result will be will necessarily be an educated guess – but as stakeholders in education and particularly, as teachers, – we surely wouldn’t want to have it any other way.