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Summary: Cooperate or Perish? – The University of the Future



We need to move from a culture of accountability to a culture of reflexivity, said Arjen Wals.



Are we serving the common good, when we measure excellence through counting citations, asked Verena Winiwarter.

LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

If uncertainty is a given, we need to educate the next generation/s to use their capabilities in much more flexible ways than has been the case up to now.

We need to stimulate

- Bringing together people of various backgrounds, with different values, knowledge and experiences, to develop creative solutions
- Accepting differences between people and making use of these different perspectives, in short
- Learning from one another.

Adapted from Wals and colleagues (2009).

Combating climate change, living within our planet's boundaries despite becoming more and more inhabitants, are only some of the "wicked problems" of our time. University and science want to contribute, but are we on the right way? Some argue for interdisciplinarity, others for excellence... and how do we measure the "quality" of these approaches? Where are the pitfalls?

We invited **Arjen Wals**, Wageningen UR, **Verena Winiwarter**, Institute of Social Ecology, and **Charlotte Voigt**, chairwoman of ÖH BOKU, to discuss with us. CDR partner **Georg Gratzner**, Institute of Forest Ecology, led through the evening.

BLURRING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN SCIENCE AND SOCIETY

Education's image has cracked, there is a general lack of trust in teachers regardless of the institutions involved. At the same time, climate change myths and other questionable messages are everywhere. Not only critical media literacy is needed; citizens also need to understand science better, while researchers need to communicate better. Arjen Wals argued for investing time in building and maintaining relationships: we need to move to a more relational world, he said.

HOW TO ASSESS SCIENTIFIC QUALITY?

A claim that will be difficult to realize in the present system, Wals admitted and stated: "Our system is dysfunctional". We have commodified everything, from papers published to students taken to defence, and are concerned with quantitative output instead of quality. We measure performativity, when, in fact, we should be focussing on relationships. Wals also argued for changing the dominant view of science: instead of aiming at reducing uncertainty and increasing predictability, we should accept chaos and ambiguity as given and work towards more flexible ways of dealing with challenges.

THE MEANING OF SCIENCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Wals not only argued for but also pointed towards ways of blurring of boundaries between science and society: science and scientists should not stay confined in ivory towers, we need to invite outside voices. Firstly, because science should be of societal relevance, but also because learning happens at the edges, when boundaries are crossed, Wals said.

Verena Winiwarter stressed that universities need to promote connecting abstract problems with personal experiences, as well as, with other people's experiences. To stimulate this type of learning, public universities should be dedicated to the common good, and should support the creation of mature citizens.

Winiwarter is not convinced of the utility of finely detailed course descriptions and learning outcomes: "I am not a wizard", she said, "I cannot know what a course does for your mind". Instead of optimizing for administration, we should optimize for students. Evaluating courses can be a valuable tool, she stressed. In the same vein, Charlotte Voigt argued for evaluating together what is useful, how teaching and research should be done, and how we can assess quality in a more adequate way.

DISPASSION VS. MORAL COMPASS: CRITICAL THINKING AND AN INVITATION TO DISCOURSE

Frequent advice to scientists is to stay as neutral as possible and to present scientific evidence in a detached way. Wals does not recommend this mode of action: scientists are part of society and should also communicate on moral issues and ethical questions. A good learning space needs to invite critical thinking, empathy and rebellion. There was consensus on the impossibility of assessing scientific quality solely on the number of peer-reviewed publications in SCI-ranked journals; however, it was less evident which type of metric could be better suited to reflect scientific quality. Verena Winiwarter closed the discussion with a widely supported plea to free researchers from the need for making monetary benefit.

References, links and further reading:

* Arjen Wals' blog on transformative learning for sustainability:
<https://transformativelearning.nl/>

* Gratzner G, Muhar A, Winiwarter V, Lindenthal T, Radinger-Peer V, and A Melcher (2019) The 2030 Agenda as a challenge to life sciences universities, *GAIA* 28(2): 100-105.

* Krainer L, and V Winiwarter (2016) Universities as Actors in Transformative Science/ Die Universität als Akteurin der transformativen Wissenschaft. Konsequenzen für die Messung der Qualität transdisziplinärer Forschung, *GAIA* 25(2): 110-116.

* Wals A, van der Hoeven N, and H Blanken (2009) The Acoustics of Social Learning. Designing Learning Processes that Contribute to a More Sustainable World. Wageningen Academic Publishers: Wageningen.

* Wals AEJ (2014) Sustainability in Higher Education in the Context of the UN DESD: a Review of Learning and Institutionalization Processes, *Journal of Cleaner Production* 62: 8-15.



Charlotte Voigt, chairwoman of ÖH BOKU, argued for evaluating efforts in science and teaching together in a dialogic manner.



Moderator Georg Gratzner reminded the audience that we need to make time and space for reflexive work, it cannot be done "on the side".

A REFLEXIVE SOCIETY

... is a society that

- uses creativity, flexibility and diversity to deal with challenges
- has the capacity to act according to existing routines, norms and values, but is also able to correct itself
- builds on reflexive citizens who critically review and alter everyday systems that are often not questioned.

Adapted from Wals and colleagues (2009).

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