



Designing Educational Futures: Imagine a Collaborative Bloom

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Abstract

This commentary is a working out loud of what a liberatory education might entail that builds on partnership and co-creation. Proposed is the addition of collaboration as a central element to education, to break individuality and hierarchy – for collective, socially just action. The prerequisites for this is openness – and the abandonment of the neoliberal competitive approach to education as well as the conscious development and use of Open EdTech for connection. Why? Because we need the collective intelligence to address the challenges of the twenty-first century and beyond.

Keywords Educational design · Collaboration · Co-production of knowledge · New Bloom · Widening participation · Educational futures · Non-elitist

Introduction

Education and higher education (HE) are not autochthonous (sprung from the earth itself) but are designed — and have been designed over time — to suit various utilitarian purposes: to ‘civilise’ the population, to ‘school’ the public for employment, and to ‘socialise’ people into what are typically hierarchical and unjust societies. This article presents a collective envisioning, a sort of utopian thinking, of what designing a liberatory education system might entail. That is, a ‘working out loud’ of what it would take to create a system where all those involved in education come together, work together, and collaborate to create a non-individualistic and anti-elitist academia.

We are realists. The political, top-down aspect of HE set within a society that is capitalistic and competitive suggests that these educational changes and reframings are challenging. There are diverse contexts and diverse understandings with respect to collaboration itself. There are also individual attitudes and wishes: do people want to

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collaborate? Could they be persuaded? So, we are wondering: is the collaboration we propose — the cross-boundary co-creation — at all possible, or are we too idealistic? Yet, we are hopeful because we need ideals. Being idealistic and dreaming the impossible is important as it moves our thinking forward — and so this think-piece argues for a new collaborative Bloom to re-envision HE. The prerequisite for this, we propose, is openness — openness of thinking, openness of resources, openness of knowledge.

The Issues with Education

The problem: Education takes place in institutions; relies on continuous testing; offers certificates and diplomas; aims for high paying, high status jobs (at least for some).

HE is specifically designed to get people ready for employment and to be socialised into an unjust society.

Education institutions are themselves graded using metrics of research and teaching excellence; part of a free-market meritocracy ideology; put individual success at the forefront; based on competitive models (within and between institutions); have difficulty accommodating the non-traditional student; driven by reflexes rather than science or rationality (Peters et al. 2020).

In line with popular narratives of what makes a ‘good education’ — and what makes a ‘good educator’ and a ‘good student’ — education has become closely aligned with schooling (Bustillos Morales and Abegglen 2020). Education happens in educational institutions, relies on continual testing, is rewarded with certificates and diplomas, and, finally, aims for high paying, high status jobs — at least for some. This includes the assessing and grading of the educational institutions themselves, with league tables defining ‘the best’, the Ivy League.

This ties in with larger socio-political language and action: research excellence, teaching excellence, free market, and meritocracy, which put individual success at the forefront, reinforcing the notion of competitiveness — and sophistry. Rather than directing educational resources to those in the most need, it becomes rational and morally right to direct those resources to those who are deemed already successful.

This can be further problematised if we look at the widening participation agenda — and the very little room that was made in HE to accommodate the new student (Ball 2017; Kayes 2022; Molinari 2022). Giddens (in Beck et al. 1994) argued that all people can be reflexive via knowledge institutions: we can all go to university now. However, the individualistic and ‘conformative’ nature of those institutions remains exclusionary (Hall 2021a, b) and can be destructive, especially to those ‘non-traditional’ students who are more collectivist or communitarian.

Academia dislocates and isolates the reviled ‘other’ from their community — and diminishes their strength. It diagnoses their ‘deficits’ (Smit 2012) and sends them off to extra-curricular units to be ‘fixed’. The problem is not in letting people in — but how we do that and especially how we accommodate those that we are letting in. How can we design something better, more imaginative, more creative, and collaborative?

The question: Can we create an education system that is non-individualistic and non-elitist, using collaboration?

Further Challenges: The Modern Panopticon

More of the problem: Surveillance culture (managerialism) dominates the institutions; produces not only alienated students but also alienated academics who cannot find time to work across boundaries.

Limited ability/space to imagine, collaborate, offer care/compassion/humanising, and engage with community.

Richard Hall (2018, 2020, 2021a, b) particularly writes of a productivity and surveillance culture creating an ‘alienated academic’ and a ‘hopeless university’, where ‘coming together’ is further problematised by the isolation of faculty themselves. Battered by increasingly individualised narratives of accountability, instructors are driven by metrics over which they have no control: pushed to survey their students and surveyed constantly themselves, to check their pass rates, their student satisfaction scores, their engagement in requisite ‘training’ programmes.

The normalising of this managerialist surveillance culture in education leads to the appropriation of potentially liberating discourses (widening participation, student-centred, students as partners) for normative and performative purposes — seeded by moral panics and hysteria — and where in the end the marginalised are demonised. To such an extent that true, ground up collaboration is becoming increasingly difficult (Abeglen et al. 2022).

The question: In this climate of constant surveillance, measurement, and unfeasible workloads, how can we find the time to work across boundaries; across disciplines; across institutions; across the academy — and beyond? What kind of education can we create, together?

The Benefits of Collaboration — or Why Collaborate?

There are many arguments for working together. Humans are social, inter-dependent beings who can achieve more collaboratively. Organisational collaboration within higher education institutions has been shown to enhance student learning (Kezar 2005), and there is considerable evidence that collaborative learning improves student outcomes (Armstrong 2015; Laal and Ghodsi 2012). Networks of universities may collaborate on research, and there are many examples of unlocking the power of collaboration for educational outcomes beyond the institution: faculty working with students, students working with other students and faculty, departments and schools working with other departments, schools, and external partners. Faculty and students co-producing learning — and knowledge, together (see Abeglen et al. 2021; Abeglen et al. 2023; Peters et al. 2021). And yet the pressures mean that

collaboration violates the usual norms in HE: people are encouraged to (over)work, research, and stress — alone.

In this context, how is it possible to create a HE that places true collaboration at its heart and makes space for truth and reconciliation, for the heteroglossia, for the people at the margins (those who experience the most churn) — a reimagining that allows us to move together to the centre? Co-production can be defined as ‘processes that iteratively bring together diverse groups and their ways of knowing and acting to create new knowledge and practices to transform societal outcomes’ (Wyborn et al. 2019). The collaborative co-production of knowledge is situated and dispersed — it allows multiple standpoints to be included in a democratic and dialogic process.

One mode of collaboratively producing academic knowledge is collective writing, a philosophical model that includes innovative methods of working together and of publication (Peters et al. 2021), helping to create, what could be termed as ‘knowledge socialism’ (Peters et al. 2020): peer production and other forms of collaboration and collective intelligence. On a technical level, we now have innovative systems for publishing research as pre-prints with open reviews such as Society (n.d.), and software and tools for joint writing. What’s missing is the full acknowledgement of this field of enquiry and practice — and the creation of a ‘work culture’ that supports co-creation.

The question: How can we support collaboration to facilitate collective cross-boundary working; the re-conceptualising of teaching, research, and writing — an education fit to address the challenges of the twenty-first century and beyond?

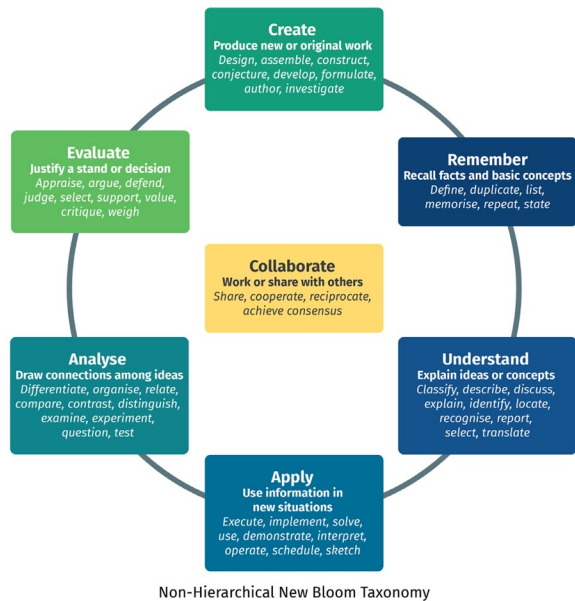
An Imaginarium for Collaboration

Bloom: Building on Bloom’s original taxonomy (Bloom et al. 1956) and its revision (Krathwohl 2002), the collaborative Bloom (Heller 2022a) re-imagines the taxonomy of educational outcomes for a more shared non-hierarchical approach — to help co-creation of a new approach to education.

Imagining collaboration and using collaboration to feed imagination has power. Importantly, ‘the image [or imaginary – the vision] ... can travel where the body can’t. It migrates and strays, taking up permanent residence in the mind, revealing what – who – has been forcibly excluded from sight’ (Laing 2020a).

We have reimagined Bloom for a more shared vision: one where collaboration can break individuality and hierarchy that emphasises reflection, discussion, and collective action for inclusivity, diversity, and change. The new non-hierarchical version of the ‘Collaborative Bloom’ (Heller 2022a) (see Fig. 1) moves away from pyramidal taxonomy towards a more fluid, organic model of how a co-created education for learning could evolve. This new Bloom has collaboration at its heart, incorporating it into all the other components — from remember and understand to apply, analyse, evaluate, and create.

Fig. 1 The non-hierarchical Bloom's Taxonomy (Heller 2022a)



The question: What are the prerequisites for this new collaborative model?

To make this new model work, with its dependence on collaboration, there are a number of prerequisites. First would be the abandonment of the neoliberal competitive approach to education. While universities compete with each other as a fundamental part of their business model, academics compete with each other, and education competes with research within institutions as a function of the reward systems under which they operate, true collaboration is not possible.

Second, and related to this, would be openness as a counter to privatisation. The Open Education Resources movement allows for sharing of educational materials and Open Education Practices offer the educational infrastructure to support the creation and adoption of these resources. We are getting used to the ways in which research publications can be published openly rather than behind paywalls, and it is time for educational practice to catch up. This includes the open sharing of pedagogical tools and approaches, the joint reflection and adaptation, the communal exchange of learning.

Third is the technology to allow for collaboration across institutional, social, and geographical boundaries. While open thinking is clearly the main prerequisite for collaboration, technology can help. Open EdTech (2022) is an example of the global development of a free and open educational platform which offers repositories for Open Educational Resources and proposes to include spaces for collaborative teaching and learning.

The question: What is it about collaboration that will ‘really’ address the problem? Can collaboration as a key educational method counter the competitive, individualised, and marketised education landscape?

The Proposal

There is a need to rediscover the power of collaboration — to imagine education ‘differently’, for to see differently ‘can be a route to clarity ... a force of resistance and repair, providing new registers, new languages in which to think’ (Laing 2020b). Following Laing (2020a, b) and her resisting (creative) imaginaries, we have re-imagined Bloom, as circular, non-hierarchical — and with collaboration at the heart. This circular Bloom requires a paradigmatic, ontological, and epistemological shift that goes beyond a simple adoption of new work policies and strategies. Collaboration becomes the defining element of what education is — and how it works.

We propose that ‘adding’ collaboration as a central element to education can transform three areas: (a) co-creation of knowledge, (b) co-development of educational resources to capture and disseminate this knowledge, and (c) the humanising of the institution. All this should positively change education — and the process of education itself. If we follow the new collaborative Bloom, rather than reinforce an elitist and hierarchical pyramid of knowledge, we will need to explore how ‘collaborate’ can fit into each part of the educational cycle.

In the process, we will have to work collaboratively, with our students, with our colleagues, across disciplines and institutions, to co-create education. This will reduce the impact of competition and push managers to be more inclusive, as together we explore how educational outcomes can reflect and be relevant to communities rather than individuals: we will both imagine and enact alternatives. The process will also cycle back and encourage us to amend the collaborative Bloom to suit our own settings and priorities.

Thus, as Heller (2022b: 42) proposes: ‘We should start by adding collaboration as an important and measurable educational outcome as an attempt to change the culture within educational organisations’. This does not mean adding new policies and frameworks, targets and output measures, but designing processes that (truly) value and acknowledge co-creation.

The new, distributed Bloom allows us to imagine a more collaborative and liberatory education: to facilitate sustainable collaborative cross-boundary working, and the pedagogical co-creation and re-conceptualising of both learning and the creation of new knowledge. Because we need the collective intelligence — and action — to address the challenges of the twenty-first century and beyond.

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