

## *Impact Thinking*

The “Alumni” magazine of my former employer is this year boastful because the institution has outgrown its original site and is to expand on the other side of Swansea Bay, where there is to be a Science and Innovation Campus. What will go on there? “The university’s collaborative model will provide a skills pipeline for industry, directly linking businesses with students and enabling them to have greater influence on teaching and course development.” (The “them” is probably intended to be the businesses not the students.) The products will be “high-calibre graduates who have the industry-relevant skills that employers value in an increasingly competitive jobs market.” The businesses will order the graduates as well as designing the menu. “Industry sponsored EngD schemes provide companies with highly skilled postgraduates with industry focused skills.” [*Sic* compound adjectives unhyphenated. Note also the simple future tense; no qualifications like “it is intended that . . .” or “the plan is for . . .”]

All this, I am told, is called *impact* thinking, because it directly impacts the community. (We have no doubt all noticed this use of *impact* as a verb complete with past participle *impacted*.) In this way it directly reverses Matthew Arnold’s plea for thinking without immediate practical upshot.

Is it thinking at all? Whatever thinking may be it is not a set of skills. A skill is knowing how to do something. I am skilled at riding a bicycle. To acquire the skill did not require thought and to exercise it does not require thought. These industry-focused skills will be taught on authority and will equip the highly-skilled graduate to do nothing else but practise the skill. Is that what is commonly understood by thinking? (What was the skill of Socrates?) Does not thinking in actual fact involve the concentration of the mind upon some question, some problem, or even some work of art? and in such a way that though so individual that it may be thought to define the human soul it only takes place in a community of thinkers?—typically the community that used to be called a University? And that community has its being in conversation, challenge, criticism: what Leavis called “creative quarrelling”. There is no room in the bespoke courses for quarrelling of any kind. Community will, however, be offered at the Science and Innovation Campus. “It can promote innovation by gathering together great minds from across the disciplines, providing the next big ideas.”

Nothing demanding thought can come out of this conglomeration. That is a prophecy which will indeed be fulfilled!

The other institution that has recently come to my attention used to be called the Royal Agricultural College, a respectable Victorian foundation with comfortable buildings. It is now the Royal Agricultural University. A university with one subject: farming. Will there be there the clash of minds intent on seeing the thing as in itself it really is, on pursuing the argument to its end? Will the institution under its new name even produce cohorts of effective farmers?

While these Innovation institutions occupy the field there is less and less space for any university shoots that may survive.

*I.R.*