

# Towards a Lifewide Curriculum



*Norman Jackson is Founder and Leader of Lifewide Education. This article will appear in the March 2014 Issue of [Lifewide Magazine](#).*

## My epiphany

In 2006, at the start of our SCEPTrE<sup>1</sup> project at the University of Surrey, I commissioned an artist to draw a picture on our wall to provide us with a vision of the educational world we were trying to create. The picture is the product of his talent and his imagination as he interpreted the conversations we had with him. It took me another 18 months to realise that in order to meet the aspirations in this vision we had to embrace the idea of a lifelong and lifewide learning. To prepare ourselves for the complexities and uncertainties of our future life we needed to draw on the learning, development and achievements we gain from all the experiences in our lives - the lives we have lived and the lives we are living.

This epiphany led me to the idea of a lifewide curriculum<sup>2</sup> to embrace an educational design that seeks to empower and enable learners to create and integrate their learning and development from any aspect of their life and gain recognition within their higher education experience



## What is a lifewide curriculum?

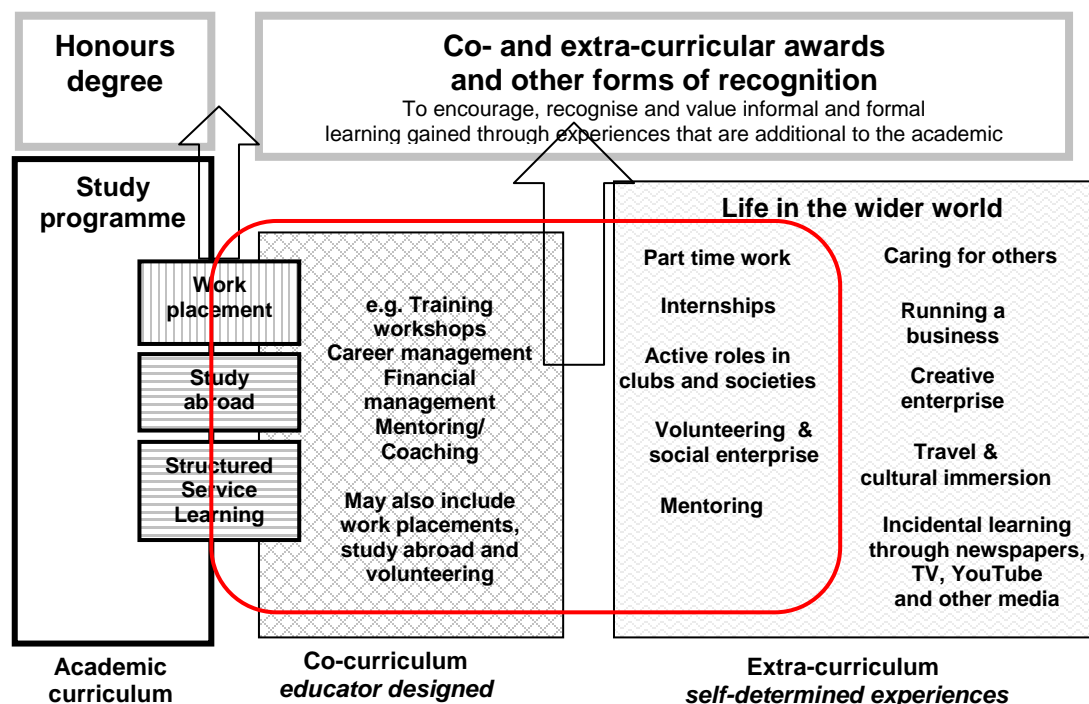
There are two ways of looking at a lifewide curriculum: from the perspective of an institution or through the eyes of a learner. From the institutional perspective a lifewide curriculum contains three curricular domains (Figure 1):

1. academic curriculum, which may by design integrate real-world work, study abroad or community-based experiences
2. co-curriculum: which includes experiences provided by the university that may or may not be credit-bearing and for which learners may or may not receive formal recognition. In some universities work placements, study abroad, mentoring and volunteering within student associations are included in the co-curriculum.
- 3 extra-curriculum: which includes experiences that are determined by the learners themselves and constitute all the spaces that they inhabit outside of the academic and co-curriculum.

The distinction between co- and extra-curricular has been deliberately blurred in some universities as experiences that would be considered to be extra-curricular in Figure 1 have been incorporated into the co-curriculum. But regardless of the way institutions define their

curricular domains this book is primarily concerned with the co-curricular and extra-curricular domains of student experience and achievement and the ways in which student learning and development is being supported and recognised in these domains.

Figure 1 Lifewide curriculum map adapted from Jackson (2011:116). The red line encloses spaces that some universities define as the co-curriculum.



## A flipped approach

Lifewide education holds the potential to be transformative<sup>3</sup> that potential is held in the second perspective of a lifewide curriculum which flips the process of educational design, learning and developing on its head<sup>2</sup>.

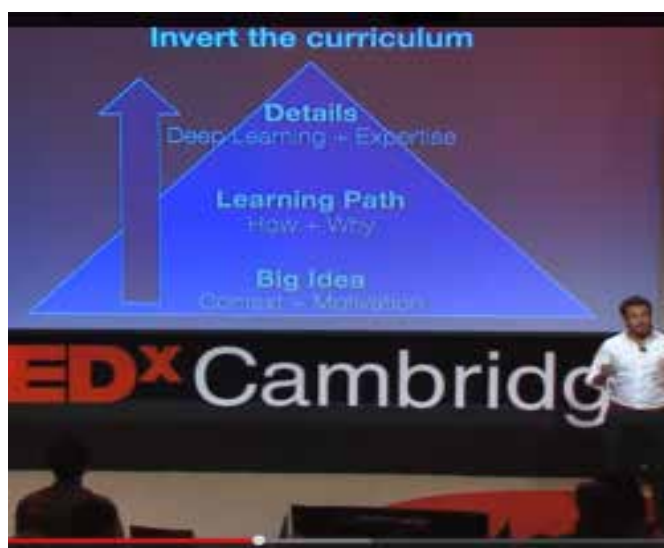
When designing educational experiences curriculum designers [teachers] usually begin with *their* purposes and the outcomes *they* want to promote, and then *they* think about the content, and process, and create and organise resources to support learning. *They* decide what counts as learning, and finally *they* evaluate the standards and quality of learning, as demonstrated through one or more assessment methods and tools that *they* have designed, guided by criteria *they* create to assist them in making judgements. This is the way teachers generally do things in higher education.

[But] what if we were to begin with the learner and his life, and see the learner as the designer of an integrated, meaningful life experience? An experience that incorporates formal education as one component of a much richer set of experiences that embrace all the forms of learning and achievement that are necessary to sustain a meaningful life. .

Lifewide education embraces the idea that the learner creates their own unique personal curriculum blending and integrating their formal educational experiences with all their other

private and social experiences, motivated by all their purposes, needs, interests and desires. Because of the variety and unscripted nature of this curriculum they learn to juggle and cope with the uncertainty and complexity of life and this is what prepares them for the rest of their life.

[Ariel Diaz talking at TEDxCambridge](#) 2013 tells the story of how, as a 10 year old boy, he became fascinated by Formula One racing cars and it inspired him to study engineering. As an undergraduate studying Engineering at Dartmouth College he found himself leading a team to build a race car and immersed in equations that enabled him to understand the dynamics of the vehicle. He spent night after night getting deep into these formulas but it was exciting and the purpose of this deep involvement was realised in the making and the creation of the race car. He argues that he would never have wanted to learn and master the equations if he had been made to memorise them without appreciating their purpose and significance and then goes on to draw the analogy with education. In his view 'we are forcing students to memorize seemingly irrelevant and mundane and boring details before allowing them to see the beauty and excitement intrinsic in every subject that they're about to study'.



In his view teachers need to begin with the big inspiring ideas that give the context and purpose for studying something... then take students along a pathway which allows them to discover things for themselves before immersing them in the detail that reveals the inner workings of the subject.

The wisdom in this story is that this is the way we learn in life outside the abstracted world of formal education. We find things we are interested in or need to know about and then work out how to gain the knowledge and skill to satisfy our interests. In other words our

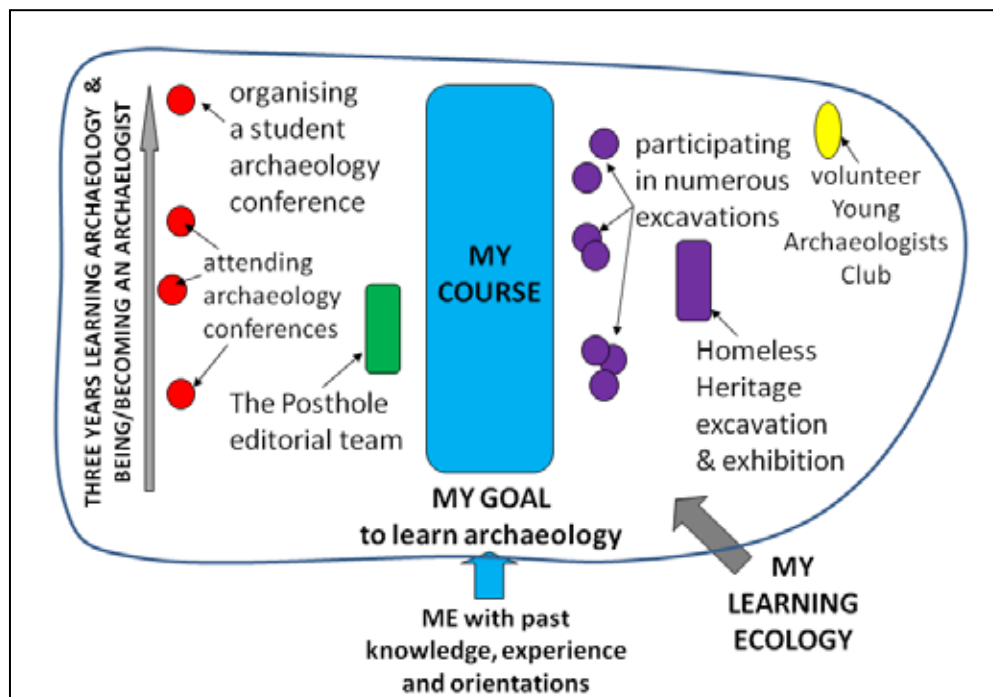
our interests, passions and needs provide us with the purpose that makes us want to learn more and create a pathway (or ecology) to learn, develop and achieve. We begin with the problem, challenge, opportunity or the vision, we work out some ways of finding out more before we get into the detail of problem working, solution finding and achieving.

Ariel Diaz's solution to making the academic curriculum more relevant, exciting and meaningful is to design and implement it in the way we live our lives by flipping it. 'We need to start with the big ideas because when you start with big ideas you give students a great context and relevance for the subject they're about to study and also create inspiration and motivation. Then when you have this context and motivation you're able to create a natural and not forced learning pathway because that excitement that motivation leads to questions - how and why and then by answering those questions you get to organically build a deep [and personally significant] knowledge and a deep expertise.' Imagine the possibilities of a flipped curriculum that was founded on purposes, relevance and meaning that really inspired individuals.

## A lifewide curriculum is an ecological curriculum

The third perspective views a lifewide curriculum as an ecological narrative. If we begin with the problems, challenges, interests in our lives we create our own process(es) that provide us with opportunities, relationships and resources for learning, development and achievement<sup>4</sup>. Self-created learning ecologies are the means by which experiences and learning are connected and integrated across the contexts and situations that constitute our life. They are the means through which we take concepts and reasoning learnt in formal education settings and apply and modify them to real world situations. Knowing how to create and sustain a learning ecology is an essential part of 'knowing how to learn' in all the different contexts that comprise an individual's life. Learning ecologies are therefore of significant conceptual and practical value to the theory and practice of lifewide learning and education.

Issue 7 of [Lifewide Magazine](#) featured a story by Michael who graduated from the University of York in 2013. The learning ecology map below shows all the things he did while he was studying for his archaeology degree that enabled him to become the archaeologist he wanted to be.



While recognising that his degree course formed the backbone for his learning about archaeology and provided me with contacts with people who were also interested in the subject and enabled him to develop a mind-set that encouraged him to engage with the subject, he acknowledged that 'some of the best opportunities for me to learn how to be an archaeologist lay outside my degree course'. These activities included: joining the editorial team of the student magazine 'Posthole', participating in numerous archaeological digs organised by research students, academic staff or other organisations, joining the Homeless Heritage project, helping to organise an exhibition, participating in several conferences and, at the end of his course, leading/organising a national conference for students, a volunteer at the Young Archaeologists Club working with school children. These experiences were highly

influential in his overall development as an archaeologist and some of them affected him deeply as a person.

One of these projects had a particular significance for me. Homeless Heritage.....is dedicated to working with homeless communities in order to understand and value the spaces used by such communities using archaeological methods....it involves working *with* homeless people in order to understand the relevance of what is found. In this way I was able to form friendships with people I would never have come into contact with in my student life. I began to appreciate the problems of homeless people and to see the world through their eyes. The experience enabled me to understand the value of contemporary archaeology, but I also began to see a new relevance of what I was doing, through it I became interested in the ways archaeology can be used to engage communities (Michael).

As Michael's story reveals so well, our personal lifewide curriculum enables us to discover our purposes, what and who we care about in life, and how we want to use our life to become the sort of person we want to be and become.

### **Why are we moving towards a lifewide curriculum?**

Over the last five years we have witnessed the implicit take-up of the idea of a lifewide curriculum as more and more universities have introduced schemes to encourage, support and recognise student development gained through experiences that are in the co- or extra-curricular domains. With such a rapid growth in these award schemes there is likely to be a multiplicity of reasons some of which are outlined below.

- The nature of the traditional single honours course in UK higher education leaves little scope for broader educational considerations especially in research-intensive universities. Student development awards offer a way of embracing forms of development that are not catered for through the academic curriculum.
- The drive for efficiency has progressively reduced contact time: in some courses students spend significantly more time doing things other than studying and student development awards provide the means of recognising learning gained outside the academic programme.
- The spiralling costs of higher education to students means that many have to undertake paid work in order to support themselves through university and there is a ready-made context for demonstrating students' employability skills by recognising that work is a highly relevant and valued context for learning.
- The need for universities to show they are providing value for the tuition fee means that those universities that are offering opportunities for development and recognition outside as well as inside the academic curriculum can claim they are providing more value for the tuition fee and thus gain a competitive advantage.
- Employability has to be an important outcome of a university education, so demonstrating a commitment to helping students' demonstrate their employability skills is an important indicator of institutional success.



- The significant support being given by employers and graduate recruiters, as evidenced through sponsorship and direct involvement in institutional schemes, further reinforces the institutional, student and parental beliefs that efforts to encourage and recognise all aspects of student development are a worthwhile.
- The introduction of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) is encouraging/forcing universities and colleges to pay more attention to the ways in which they are supporting and recognising student development beyond the academic curriculum.
- We should also recognise that there is a genuine desire to broaden and deepen the concept of what a higher education means and to embrace much richer representations of learning that truly embraces the real world of students' lives beyond the classroom.

### Learning to author our lives

While all these factors are influencing the growth of a lifewide curriculum in higher education, the emergence of this phenomenon is fundamentally about making higher education *more relevant* to the present and future lives of learners and encouraging and enabling them to become the people they need or want to be.

In her article Marcia Baxter Magolda talks about the process of how we gradually learn to become the person we want to be. It's a developmental journey that we all have to make and there is no pre-determined roadmap for how we undertake this journey which Marcia describes through the concept of self-authorship.



For Yalda, the first graduate of LWE's Lifewide Development Award, her personal lifewide curriculum is enabling her to begin this journey towards who she wants to become while she is studying for her politics degree. She is trying to live an independent life away from home. She is a conscientious student and works hard to achieve a good degree. But her vision of her own future is to

work in radio as a presenter. In spite of some parental resistance to the idea she has made her own mind up and she is trying to make it happen. We can see from the activities she has chosen to undertake outside her course how she has created her own lifewide curriculum over the last two years. By involving herself in experiences that are additional to her

academic study she has developed the skills, experience and relationships to gain paid employment as a presenter at a London commercial radio station.

## Achieving a vision of future learning

A recent EU foresight report aimed at visualising the Future of Learning (see Christine Redecker's article) framed it's vision of learning in these terms, *'personalisation, collaboration and informal learning will be at the core of learning in the future. The central learning paradigm is characterised by lifelong and lifewide learning and shaped by the ubiquity of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)'*<sup>6</sup>

We can see that Michael and Yalda are already living this vision by creating their own lifewide curriculum. They have *personalised* their learning activities to enable themselves to develop in ways that are important and meaningful to them. They have *collaborated* with others in projects that have enabled them to achieve while developing relationships that will enable them to progress further along their intended pathways and most of their learning has been *informal* through the doing of things that is relevant to the purposes and goals they have set themselves.

The challenge for higher education is to support this reality by encouraging and supporting learners as they form their lifewide curriculum and valuing and recognising the learning and development they gain through all their lifewide experiences.

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