WHY ART, DESIGN AND COMMUNICATION ARE RELEVANT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND CITIZENSHIP

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ABSTRACT

According to Boulding (1956), the way in which we mentally picture what something 'is' determines not only what we believe it is 'for', but also our decisions in our effort to achieve it. As a consequence of the way in which higher education is now commonly defined and described, students have been led to IMAGINE HE as a service to be provided. Implicit within and reinforced by this mental picture of HE is the assumption that it demands the same (minimal) level of involvement by its customers as, that provided by dentists or auto mechanics. As a consequence of the way in which an increasing proportion of our students picture both the purpose of HE and who is responsible for it makes it less likely that they will actively engage in the learning environment. To counter the pernicious influence of this increasingly widespread conception of education, I believe that we must be able to offer our students a different 'mental picture' of learning – and one that gives them a reason to commit to it. I will suggest that Art, Design and Communication programmes are ideally placed to do this.

KEY WORDS: 'mental picture' of higher education and learning, student engagement

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing tension in higher education (HE) between, on one side, the need to compete for customers who (or, so we're told) make their selections based on league tables and customer satisfaction surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS) – and on the other, the belief that higher education should be – and should provide – more than just job training to equip graduates with practical skills they can sell to prospective employers. (And, in case you are tempted to assume from this opening that I write from the lofty vantage point of a speculative Humanist discipline currently under threat from the demand to justify its practical and economic relevance, I teach advertising, marketing and branding.)

In his recent plea to reclaim the idea of universities as institutions for 'conserving, understanding, extending and handing on to subsequent generations the intellectual, scientific, and artistic heritage of mankind', Collini (2012) reminds us that, in our efforts to 'equip young people to get jobs in the fast-moving economy of tomorrow' and 'contribute to

growth', universities must not lose sight of their social responsibility to inculcate civic values and promote social justice. While I accept without reservation or hesitation that HE has an important responsibility to prepare its graduates to pursue economically rewarding and satisfying careers, those of us who agree with Collini that HE should be more than this – that it should also encourage and enable graduates to become both self-aware individuals and informed citizens – are confronted with two significant obstacles:

The first is the 'mental picture' of higher education with which many students arrive at university. The second is the mounting pressure from government and university administrators to design and deliver HE programmes that emphasise the acquisition of practical skills rather than critical thinking skills.

By the term 'mental picture' I mean the (largely unacknowledged and unexamined) assumptions about the nature of education and learning with which students arrive at university. It is my position that these 'mental pictures' shape both our students' beliefs about what 'learning' is (how it is defined), its purpose (what it is 'for'), how it is achieved (what is required for it to happen), and who is responsible for making sure it happens (the role and responsibilities of student, teacher and institution) and therefore their subsequent decisions and behaviours.

The use of 'mental pictures' is the oldest form of human cognition: our most basic way of knowing what something 'is'. As Boulding (1956) demonstrated, the way in which we IMAGiNE or mentally picture what something 'is' determines what we think it is 'for', and this, in turn, shapes our behaviour and our decisions in our efforts to achieve it.

Close your eyes and think of *Home*, *A Pleasant Day* or *My Ideal Job* and your mind will spontaneously summon up a visual image. Hold this picture in your mind and examine it carefully: this picture not only *stands for* the idea, memory or experience, but in the particular visual details from which it is assembled, it also describes your feelings, assumptions and attitudes about the idea it represents. Do you think of your life as a path to be explored, a journey to be enjoyed, a ladder to be climbed, or as a competitive struggle against hostile forces to be won? The way you imagine (IMAGiNE) your life dictates the rules you must follow in order to succeed. How do you 'picture' Success? Is it the accumulation of wealth and material possessions? The attainment of personal power or professional status? The possession of a beautiful, youthful body granted the sexual favours of attractive partners – or the joy to be found in being worthy of the love of those around you? The way in which we 'picture' our goal determines the evidence we will pursue – and this, in turn, shapes the lives we will lead.

In this article, I will briefly sketch out why I believe these two factors to be detrimental to the interests of our students – not only in terms of their capacity to realise (in both senses of the word) the traditional goals of higher education, but also for their prospects of acquiring the skills deemed essential by the creative industries. I will then suggest how we might profitably challenge the first as a means to constructively address the second.

THE 'MENTAL PICTURE' OF HIGHER EDUCATION WITH WHICH MANY STUDENTS ARRIVE AT UNIVERSITY

As a consequence of the dominance of the neoliberal model and its way of 'picturing' the world, the traditional conception of HE as 'a contributor to the public good' has been increasingly supplanted by a more mercantile view (King, 2004: xvii) in which its benefits are defined in purely economic terms (Barnett, 1992: 4): by the state as a way of improving GDP and national economic well-being and competitiveness (Knight and Yorke, 2003: 3) and by students and their parents as an advantage in securing access to a desirable career.

According to the way in which its value is described in popular entertainment as well as by politicians, pundits and even by some university administrators, a degree is now increasingly seen as a financial investment (King, 2004: 23) and as a means to acquire the professional skills that can be sold in the market (Fitzmaurice, 2008: 341).

> A shift is occurring away from the notion of higher education as a publicly funded social good to one that sees it more as a private investment in a better career and life generally, which reinforces the view that users should pay a substantial part for such opportunities. (King, 2004: 23)

With financial advantage rather than an educated populace now seen as its primary objective, and graduates' career prospects – rather than society as a whole – as its primary beneficiaries, it follows logically, even inexorably, that graduates should be expected to bear its costs. As a result, the increase in the cost to students is likely to further reinforce their view of education as a service to be provided and so reduce further the impetus to engage actively in the learning environment.

In addition to the well-documented decline in the academic skills and inclinations of many of those entering university, designers of higher education programmes must also contend with the pressure exerted by government and university administrators to ensure that learning outcomes as well as the criteria by which their attainment is measured defer to the now-dominant metaphor of The Market™ as the ultimate arbiter of both purpose and value

(Newman and Courturier, 2002). Whereas the value or 'quality' of HE programmes had previously been defined and maintained by a rigorous process of peer review, 'quality' is now assessed according to two very different criteria: the unit cost at which large numbers of students can be successfully promoted (one might say *processed*) through programmes of study (what Barnett [1992] termed 'state quality'), and the popularity of programmes as indicated by consumer choice (what Barnett [1992] termed 'market quality').

In 2009, the UK government transferred responsibility for higher education to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) as a consequence of which, many have suggested that its non-economic benefits will be 'increasingly neglected and disregarded' (Attwood, 2009). In November 2009, it was reported that universities were expected to 'involve employers more in both course design and the funding of degrees' (Curtis, 2009). As a result, (what are perceived to be) the needs of industry have increasingly determined the content (and thereby the focus and purpose) of higher education. This conception of the primary function of higher education as a means to serve the needs of industry was made explicit by Lord Mandelson, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, in his letter (December 2009) to the Chairman of HEFCE:

> I am also asking you, in consultation with all interested parties, to devise new […] higher education programmes that deliver the higher level skills needed. This will require a […] way of identifying those programmes and activities that make a special contribution to meeting economic […] priorities, and a mechanism to redeploy funds, on a competitive basis, to those institutions that are able and willing to develop new or expanded provision in these key areas. (Lord Mandelson, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, letter to the Chairman of HEFCE, December 2009)

While we accept without hesitation or reservation the responsibility to ensure the practical relevance of our programmes and to provide graduates with the means to pursue successful careers, a significant difficulty in fostering 'the higher level skills' required to meet Mandelson's objectives is an institutional culture that, increasingly by design and decree, gives primacy to those skills traditionally learned by 'watching and doing' – which only reinforces students' misunderstanding of both the nature of these higher level skills as well as how they are attained. Entwistle (1991) describes this as a significant change in emphasis – away from the previous emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge and towards a more pragmatic focus on the ability to complete tasks (what Biggs, 1987, termed 'surface' rather than 'deep' learning). I submit that this change in emphasis makes it less likely that

our students are able to recognise – let alone accept – their degree of responsibility for their own learning.

In conversation with the numerous Creative Directors of leading advertising and branding agencies who regularly contribute to our programme, we have been repeatedly assured that, while competency with contemporary tools and techniques is indeed expected of graduates, the most important skills industry requires us to foster are of a much higher order: those that enable graduates to learn how to learn in order to be 'able to learn and add to their knowledge and skills in a variety of situations in order to contribute to the development of their organisations (Harvey et al., 1997: 63).

There is therefore a dichotomy between, on one hand, the pressure exerted by both government and university administrators to ensure that programmes focus on the development of practical skills – and on the other, industry's demand for employees who can anticipate, understand, and generate appropriate solutions for diverse and complex problems. The insistence by both government and university administrators that the design and delivery of HE curricula should emphasise the acquisition of practical skills rather than critical thinking skills suggests that both groups have profoundly misunderstood what it is that industry requires of our graduates, thereby undermining our ability to lead our students to develop the skills explicitly demanded by industry. In other words, it seems that it is not only our students' mental pictures of education that now threaten the ability of HE programmes to foster, and the capacity of students to develop, the higher level skills Mandelson (2009) demanded, but those of policymakers in government and university as well.

Boulding's (1956) insight, and everything we know about advertising tells us that, as a consequence of the way in which the nature of higher education is repeatedly described, its purpose defined, its value measured, and its beneficiaries identified, students have learned (or, more accurately, have been taught) that HE is a service for which they are paying (and now paying handsomely), and one which, like the services provided by other professionals (such as dentists or auto mechanics), demands the same (minimal) level of involvement by its customers as any other. (Until recently, this phenomenon has been largely restricted to universities in Anglophone societies. In continental Europe, higher education has traditionally been regarded as a social good and as a consequence, enjoyed widespread popular support for comprehensive state funding. Following the election of several 'pro-market' parties in several nations however, this now seems likely to change.)

This 'mental picture' of education (what it 'is', what it is 'for' and whose 'job' it is to provide it) implicitly minimises students' individual responsibility *for* and commitment *to* learning, and thereby actively discourages them from developing the proactive and self-directed approach towards the learning environment necessary to realise (in both senses of the word) its benefits. As a consequence, I submit that this 'picture' of HE has led students (and, again, many university administrators) to believe that the quality of *the service we provide* to be the product of the teacher's efforts rather than their own. (If true, this gives lie to the common complaint that students are 'lazy'; they are not, but are simply responding logically to a limited – and very limiting – 'mental picture' of both the objectives of learning and both the nature and extent of their individual responsibility for achieving them.) If we are to engage our students 'meaning-fully' in learning, we must be able to offer them a different 'picture' of education: and one that gives them a reason to commit to it.

The second obstacle we face is:

THE MOUNTING PRESSURE FROM GOVERNMENT AND UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS TO DESIGN AND DELIVER THE PROGRAMMES THAT EMPHASISE THE ACQUISITION OF PRACTICAL SKILLS RATHER THAN CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

In the past century, the purpose (and therefore the core responsibilities) of higher education have undergone a number of profound changes: from its origins as a place of higher learning in the liberal arts and the 'pure' or investigative sciences (in which knowledge and understanding were pursued for the fulfilment of human intellectual potential – devoid from the necessity of practical application and economic gain), to its current incarnation as a means of facilitating lifelong learning (Jarvis, Holford and Griffin 1998) in order to enhance the host state's global competitiveness (King, 2004) within, the knowledge-based economies of the 21st century.

There are, however, reasons to doubt that the nature of this new responsibility is sufficiently understood and that its implicit requirements are adequately endorsed.

In addition to the weaker academic skills and inclinations of many of those entering university, designers of higher education programmes must now also contend with the pressure exerted by government and university administrators to ensure that learning outcomes as well as the criteria by which their attainment is measured defer to the now-dominant metaphor of The Market™ as the ultimate arbiter of both purpose and value (Newman and Courturier, 2002: 2).

Accordingly, whereas the value or 'quality' of HE programmes had previously been defined and maintained by a rigorous process of peer review, their 'quality' is now assessed according to two very different criteria (Barnett, 1992: 4): the unit cost at which large numbers of students can be successfully promoted (or processed) through programmes of study (state quality), and the popularity of programmes as indicated by consumer choice (market quality). In this context, it is worth remembering that, in his independent review on higher education funding and student finance released in October 2010, Lord Browne proposed that 'competition and student choice should be the main drivers of quality' (cited by Baker, 2010)

In addition therefore to its implications for the attitude of students towards their studies, Boulding's insight (that the way in which we 'mentally picture' what something is 'for' determines our actions in trying to achieve it) also has implications for our efforts to improve levels of student engagement and achievement. Is it our objective to improve the market position/viability of the department/university – or to enhance the capability of students in terms of their ability to make informed decisions as professionals, as citizens and as individuals?

Writing for the UK Higher Education Academy, Trowler and Trowler (HEA, 2010: 3) describes the first as *The Market Model of Student Engagement*, and the second as *The Developmental Model of Student Engagement*.

> The first locates students in higher education primarily as consumers, and is based on neoliberal thinking about the marketisation of education. From this perspective student engagement focuses primarily on ensuring consumer rights, hearing the consumer voice and about enhancing institutional market position. The second locates students as partners in a learning community, and is based on constructivist notions of learning such as the co-creation of knowledge by learners and teachers. [This] places greater emphasis on student growth and development and is primarily concerned with the quality of learning and the personal, mutual and social benefits that can be derived from engaging with [it]. (HEA, 2011)

For those who adhere to *The Market Model*, priority will be given to strategies designed to produce 'happy customers' to ensure positive evaluations of our programmes in the NSS.

As a result of the (now urgent) imperative to compete for customers (and, as part of this, to improve standings in the NSS 'customer satisfaction' surveys), there has been an

understandable (but, I would argue, regrettable and detrimental) pressure on programme and module leaders to withdraw those assessments on which students consistently perform poorly, and replace these with others more closely aligned with students' existing abilities and inclinations to ensure that the majority pass them (and that a significant proportion do well).

Admittedly, any such realignment is likely to produce three desirable results:

1. students will be happier, (albeit by giving them a false indication of their achievement),
2. as a result of which, rates of student retention would probably improve,
3. and this, in turn, will increase both the university's income and the job security of staff.

Not bad.

But these ostensibly positive results come at a price. Even if we reject the view of the Dearing Report (that HE should 'enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels [...] to contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment' [NCIHE 1997]), programmes would no longer be able to ensure that graduates possess the knowledges and cognitive skills demanded by the industries in whose interests such changes are allegedly made.

Those of us who teach communication, design and media programmes are constantly reminded by the representatives from the creative industries with whom we maintain close contact that, while competency with contemporary tools and techniques is indeed expected of graduates, the most important skills and aptitudes industry requires us to foster are of a higher order:

1. The ability to recognise, to understand, to think critically about, and to express the meaning and implications of key facts and relevant information,
2. And, to learn how to learn in order to be able to 'learn and add to their knowledge and skills in a variety of situations' (Harvey et al., 1997, cited by' Burke et al., 2005: 134).

Both of these require the ability to understand and make meaning.

In advancing policies designed to ensure happy customers, proponents of *The Market Model* also appear to overlook the fact that our institutions' longer-term viability depends not only

on the satisfaction of current customers – but also on the employability of graduates, and this (at least in the creative industries), depends on the ability of graduates to *recognise*, *understand* and *make* meaning (Sharp 2010, Thompson 2010). Unfortunately, we find that efforts to foster these skills and to apply assessment criteria that accurately reflect the extent to which these skills have been demonstrated often result in very unhappy customers.

In addition, given the number of career changes our graduates are likely to make (or wish to make) throughout their working lives, the cognitive skills that enable graduates to identify appropriate communications 'solutions' for clients are also those they will need to be able to make informed decisions in the pursuit of a personally fulfilling career. Therefore, while we acknowledge the implications for retention if our students fail assignments, by 'realigning' *what* we teach (and therefore *what* and *how* we assess) in pursuit of customer satisfaction not only deprives students of the opportunity to develop the cognitive skills essential for successful careers in the creative industries, but makes HE complicit in endorsing a limited, and limiting, 'mental picture' of what learning 'is', what it is 'for' and how it happens.

There is therefore, a dichotomy between the pressure exerted by government and university administrators to ensure that both the content of programmes and their assessment regimes focus on the acquisition of practical skills – and industry's demand for employees who can anticipate, understand, and generate appropriate solutions for diverse and complex problems.

The insistence (by both government and some university administrators) that the design and delivery of HE curricula prioritise practical skills – and the pressure to ensure that both *what* and *how* we assess allows students to achieve good marks even with the minimal effort many currently invest in their studies – suggests that both groups (government and university administrators) profoundly misunderstand what it is that industry requires of graduates, and so results in policies that actually undermine the capacity of programmes to deliver this. In other words, it is not only our students' 'mental pictures' of education that threaten the ability of HE programmes to foster, and the capacity of students to develop, the higher level skills deemed essential by industry, but those of policymakers in government and universities as well.

Emphasis on the use of tools and techniques will not prepare our graduates to contribute to the viability of the creative industries because, by the time they graduate, the pace of social, economic and technological change will have rendered such expertise obsolete. Instead, higher education programmes must provide our students with the capacity to anticipate, to

recognise, and to meet as-yet unimaginable opportunities and challenges, not only for their own personal and economic benefit, but in the interests of the industry partners whose objectives our programmes are required to serve. If we are to prepare our students for the unanticipable demands of the 21st century economy, we must not picture or IMAGINE (and thereby implicitly present to our students) expertise with the current version of industrial tools and processes as ends in themselves; we must 'define' and present these as a means to develop the essential critical thinking skills they will need if they are to make informed decisions in the application of such tools as will be developed in the future. In other words, we must teach them how to fish.

Ramsden wrote:

> To sustain a high quality student experience, we must not fall into the trap of accepting as accurate a reading of students principally as consumers, demanding value for money, expecting 'satisfaction', passively receiving skills and knowledge, grumpily complaining about service standards, and favouring above all else the easy acquisition of qualifications. [...] The vision of learner as passive consumer is inimical to a view of students as partners with their teachers in a search for understanding – one of the defining features of higher education from both academic and student perspectives. There is no reason to impose a false divide between higher education as a road to a better, more highly-paid career and a vision of it as a life-changing personal experience. (Ramsden, 2008)

If we are to do so, we must be able to offer our students a different and more compelling story.

TEACHING BY STORY

To be able to meet the demands of the creative industries, to contribute to the economic well-being of the nation, to succeed within a job market in which they will likely change careers several times during their lives, and to enable them to lead rewarding and fulfilling lives, we must provide our students with more than just practical skills – we must ensure that they are able to reason: to recognise important information, to understand and explain its implications, and to use this knowledge to generate innovative and appropriate solutions.

At present however, a significant proportion of students entering undergraduate communication and design programmes arrive without the cognitive skills to do this, the language skills on which these skills depend (Allen et. al. 1999, Arum & Roksa 2011, Sprague 2002), nor the inclination to invest the time and effort necessary to develop these abilities.

To assist them in doing so, our programmes – and the learning environments in which these are delivered – must offer students a new 'mental picture' of education, one that not only provides the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to *recognise*, *understand* and *express* the meaning of information, but one which leads students to see the point of doing so.

Fortunately, as a result of the requirement to explore and exploit the nature and implications of 'mental pictures', communication, media and design programmes provide an ideal opportunity, not only to develop the skills and abilities demanded by industry, but to increase student engagement and their commitment to their learning.

Central to contemporary media practice is the notion of compelling narratives: the stories we tell about ideas, products, people, places and events. Students of communication and design programmes are (or should be) obliged to accept that, without the capacity to identify – and the inclination to reflect critically upon – how the 'mental pictures' or stories implicit within corporate media products have influenced their perceptions of the worlds around (and within) them, they will be unable to make appropriate and informed decisions in the conception and execution of effective strategies and materials. Put another way, if our students are not able and prepared to recognise *how* and *why* advertising and communication materials have affected *them* – including *why* they want *what* they want – they will be unable to produce materials that will likewise affect others.

As a way to introduce *both the use* and *the implications of* the cognitive skills and knowledges required by industry, communication and design programmes can (and should) lead students to examine their own mental pictures and to consider carefully how these have shaped their assumptions, decisions and behaviours about what it means to be a student. Doing so will not only provide them with the means and incentive to develop the ability to understand and acquire the skills needed to succeed in their chosen professions, but will also improve our students' levels of engagement – by showing them how the (admittedly challenging) cognitive skills required for their chosen professions are also those needed to make informed choices in both the public and private spheres.

Several studies have shown that 'learner-centred teachers and teaching are vital to engaging learners' (Zepke 2011: 2). This aligns with the findings reported by many others (Crumpton & Gregory 2011, Entwistle, et. al. 2002, Hockings et. al. 2008, Sanacore, 2008, Thomas & Jamieson-Ball 2011, Yorke & Longden 2008) that students must perceive what we teach to be relevant to their goals and aspirations. I believe however that, as result of

the pressure to focus both teaching and assessment on practical skills the advantages of which I have listed above), we inadvertently reinforce a limited – and limiting – 'picture' of education, one that is not sufficiently or demonstrably relevant to their *lives*, and so unlikely to provide a meaning-full reason to learn.

Fortunately, the study of narratives essential for successful professional practice in art, design and communication, demands precisely the same higher order skills necessary to make education relevant to the lives of our students and so, such programmes are ideal environments in which to foster these.

Within the context of an advertising programme, this means that, in addition to teaching advertising from a corporate perspective (what I call *How we, as advertisers, Do It to audiences*), we have the means to assist our students in learning to recognise and understand *How advertisers Do It to us*. By leading them to recognise and consider critically the ideologies implicit within corporate speech and their impact on our perceptions of *Products*, *Politicians* and *The Right Priorities*, we are not only able to provide the skills needed by industry, but also to prepare our graduates for the challenges of shaping the world that you and I will not live to see. In this way, I believe that we can use the opportunity to teach the skills required by industry to support the goals of a humanist education.

Wittgenstein wrote:

> The effect of making men think in accordance with dogmas, perhaps in the form of certain graphic propositions, will be very peculiar: I am not thinking of these dogmas as determining men's opinions, but rather as completely controlling the *expression* of all opinions. People will live under an absolute, palpable tyranny, though without being able to say they are not free. (Wittgenstein, 1937: 28e)

By exploring the relationship between our students' 'mental pictures' and their impact on their assumptions, we have found that we are also able to address one of the most common reasons for poor levels of student retention: the complaint (as recorded in exit interviews with those who have withdrawn from other programmes of study) that they could not see the point of what they were asked to do, or how it all fits together. The feedback we've had from our students has shown that, in helping them to see how each *atom of information* (a fact, a theory, a strategy, an implication, a technique) builds towards a larger *molecule of understanding*, they are better able to make appropriate decisions – both in the development of effective communications materials for clients, as well as in matters that affect their lives.

In conclusion, I submit that it is only by helping our students to recognise and explore the 'mental pictures' that drive their decisions that they will be able to identify personally fulfilling goals – and develop the skills necessary to create lives for themselves in which they may achieve them. As a teacher, and as a fellow human being, I can think of no greater gift to offer.

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