



Rutherford

# Mental Pictures – and their implications for higher education

**Author:** Rutherford

**Institution:** University of Chester

**Keywords:** mental pictures, re-imagining higher education, industry requirements

## Abstract

The purpose and core responsibilities of higher education have both undergone profound changes; from the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake to supporting lifelong learning and providing ‘transferable skills’ for the knowledge-based economies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These changes have coincided with an equally fundamental change in our perception of work as a result of which our students will likely change careers, not just jobs, several times during their working lives. Central to the capacity of higher education to ensure that graduates have the skills needed for both their chosen fields and to find fulfilment in their careers are the implications of the current ‘mental picture’ of HE as a mercantile service that emphasises ‘surface learning’ and therefore demands a minimal level of engagement by its ‘customers’.

## Introduction

The purpose of education is to prepare graduates to take their place in the world. When, as a result of changes in the way in which we define ‘our place in the world’ (for example, from ‘citizen’ to ‘professional’ or ‘consumer of services’), it follows that there will be a corresponding change in both the content (what is taught) and the purpose (why it is taught) of education.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the role of work is very different than it was for previous generations. One of the most significant changes has been the expansion of the ‘needs’ we expect to meet through our choice of careers. Whereas previous generations met their ‘needs’ for belonging and self-esteem through social relationships (including the family, church, community and political associations) and expected employment to provide only a sufficient (and sufficiently secure) source of income, since the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western man (followed promptly by Western woman) now look to careers and professional affiliations to meet ‘needs’ for acceptance, status and esteem. Where we once defined ourselves in terms of personal and social relations, we now define ourselves by ‘what we do’. As a result, our choice of careers has a profound influence over both our self-image and our emotional well-being.

For two reasons, this fundamental change in the role of work has particular significance for those of us in Art, Design and Media education:

1. The way in which we define and carry out the responsibilities of our professional practice (including the way in which we describe the opportunities, rewards and challenges of employment in the creative industries), has a profound influence over the way in which our students will perceive, define and pursue their career aspirations.
2. Due to their capacity to shape an audience’s perceptions of products, events and social priorities, the materials our graduates will produce within the creative industries will have



Mental pictures and the creative practice class

Photo: Rutherford

a significant influence over the way in which their audiences define and pursue their own.

In order to fulfil our responsibilities – both to our students as well as to those who will be affected by their careers – we must not only be aware of our ‘mental pictures’ of work and their implications, but ensure that our students consider their own.

### **The contemporary world of work**

In the past century, both the purpose and 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 rather than for practical application and economic gain), to the provision of practical skills for (what was then expected to be) a lifelong career in a single industry – to the current phase of supporting lifelong learning (Jarvis, Holford and Griffin 1998). In this incarnation, higher education is charged with providing students with the means to succeed within an employment market that has changed as radically as the purpose and the provision of higher education. Accordingly, we must not only ensure that students have the skills they will need in order to adapt to an ever-changing workplace, we also have a duty to the future of the industries our graduates propose to enter to ensure that they will be able to anticipate – and meet – as-yet unimagined challenges and opportunities. According to Harvey et al. (1997), (as cited by Burke, Jones and Doherty, 2005), ‘[e]mployers want employees who can use their skills and abilities to develop the organization. They want

colleagues who exhibit an ability to learn and add to their knowledge and skills in a variety of situations...’

Gone are the days in which training in the use of tools and techniques prepares graduates for lifelong employment because the rapid pace of social, economic and technological change renders such expertise effectively obsolete by the time they graduate. Instead, rather than considering (and thereby presenting to our students) expertise with the current version of industrial tools and processes as ends in themselves, if we are to prepare our students for the constantly changing demands of these industries we must consider – and present – the use of such tools as a means to develop the critical thinking skills that will enable students to ‘learn how to learn’: to develop the capacity to make appropriate and informed decisions – both in the effective application of tools and processes not yet invented and in the achievement of objectives not yet imagined. In other words, we must ‘teach them how to fish’, rather than simply handing them tomorrow’s dinner.

As a consequence of the continuous growth and self-awareness we hope that our graduates will manifest, it is inevitable that, at various stages in their working lives, many will find that the careers in which they are then engaged no longer fulfil their higher needs. This, and the rapidly changing demands of all industrial sectors (as well as those of the employment market as a whole) make it likely that our graduates will change careers, not just jobs, as many as seven times during their lives (Northumbria University, 2009). It is therefore incumbent upon us not only to bring the likelihood of this situation to their attention so that they may anticipate and plan for it, but also to provide them >>



HE graduates as products

Photo: Rutherford

with the means to make the necessary transitions to enable them to accurately identify – and successfully pursue – new career directions in which they will be able to achieve professional and personal fulfilment. However, as D'Andrea and Gosling (2001) and others have observed, lecturers face a formidable task in meeting these challenges, in part because students are less well prepared for the demands of higher education. A major contributing factor to this is their 'mental picture' of HE.

### The 're-imaging' of HE

The use of mental pictures or 'narrative metaphors' is the oldest form of human cognition – our most basic way to assign meaning and to know what something 'is'. In other words, *what* we think of something is determined by *the way in which we mentally 'picture' or IMAGInE it*. (Close your eyes and think of 'Home' 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 mental image 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.)

Constantly reinforced by parents, politicians, popular entertainment, media commentators and, God help us all, university Vice-Chancellors, our students have been 'taught' to 'see' higher education as a 'service' to be 'provided'. Implicit within this conception is the suggestion that it demands the same (minimal) level of engagement by its 'customers' as any other, leading students to expect to be 'spoon-fed' information (Grayling, 2009), and to be told how, and when, to use it. Put another way, rather than 'seeing' education as the result of their own efforts, students have been led to IMAGInE that education is the result of the teacher's 'work' rather than their own. This 'mental picture' of higher education with which students arrive at university makes it less likely that they will recognise and accept their responsibility for learning. (If correct, this gives lie to the common complaint that students are 'lazy'; they are not, they are simply responding appropriately to a limited – and very limiting – 'mental picture' of what learning 'is' and how it happens.)

In 2009, the UK government transferred the responsibility for higher education to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS): a move that many believe reflects a view that HE should simply be regarded as another instrument of business development, and

that its non-economic benefits will be neglected and disregarded. (Attwood, 2009).

These changes (described by some as the 'colonisation' of higher education by economic, rather than humanist imperatives) reflect the view widely shared by students, their parents, government and university administrators that the primary responsibility of higher education is to improve the employability of students (Knight and Yorke, 2003). This has been accompanied by a change in both what is meant by the 'quality of education' as well as the nature of the evidence by which it is measured (Barnett, 1992).

This 'commodification of higher education' (Shumar, 1997) has redefined its primary purpose and value in terms of the skills that a worker can sell in the marketplace (Fitzmaurice, 2008). By casting graduates as its primary beneficiaries (and financial advantage as its primary outcome), it follows that they should bear a larger proportion of its costs. As a result, we have witnessed a significant reduction of per capita funding, the replacement of grants with loans that must be repaid, and the introduction of (and, the recent drastic increase in) tuition fees – all of which shifts the financial cost of HE onto students. Higher education has, of course, always been a 'commodity'; my point here is that it is now a 'commodity' of a different kind: one pursued for different objectives, with different strategies, and whose merits and 'success' are assessed by different criteria. As Boulding (1956) observed, the way in which we define what something 'is' determines its purpose (what it is 'for'), and its purpose determines the nature of the evidence to which we look in assessing its quality.

Consistent with this new 'mental picture' of higher education, industry has been given an ever-increasing degree of responsibility for determining the content (and thereby the purpose) of programmes of study. In November 2009, it was reported that universities would be expected to 'involve employers more in both course design and the funding of degrees' (The Guardian, 03 November, 2009). That the primary function of higher education is now 'seen' 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:



The new HE objectives

Image: Rutherford

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 and social 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.

As a result, programmes of study have come under increasing pressure from both government and university administrators to ensure that both learning outcomes as well as the criteria by which their attainment is assessed reflect the now-dominant metaphor of The Market™ as the ultimate arbiter of value: consumer choice – a criterion which, since the late 1970s, has also been adopted as a means to assess the quality of provision of other social ‘goods’, including health care (Rutherford, 2008). Where the ‘quality’ of education had previously been established through a rigorous process of peer review (Clark, 1983), as a result of this ‘re-imagining’ of higher education, the ‘quality’ of its ‘product’ is now measured according to two very different criteria: the unit cost at which large numbers of students can be promoted (processed) through programmes of study (what Barnett [1992] termed ‘state quality’) and by the popularity of its programmes (‘market quality’).

Browne said that competition and student choice should be the main drivers of quality. (THE, 14 October, 2010).

It appears however that, in their demand that ‘industry requirements’ drive the higher education curricula, both government and university administrators have seriously misunderstood the nature of these requirements. While a familiarity with the current tools and techniques is indeed expected of graduates, the most important skills that industry requires us to embed are of a higher order: those that enable our graduates to ‘learn how to learn’. Instead, the insistence of both government and university administrators on the acquisition of practical skills that can be easily quantified for league tables in pursuit of ‘state’ and ‘market’ quality threatens to deprive our students of the opportunity to develop the very skills demanded by industry. In other words, it is not only students’ ‘mental picture’ of higher education that undermines their ability to develop the skills necessary to succeed in the modern workplace, but those of government and university

administrators as well – with potentially disastrous results for students and industry alike.

### A suggestion for those who teach Art, Design and Media

Faced with the challenges resulting from the limited (and limiting) ‘mental pictures’ of both students and those who prescribe the objectives of higher education curricula, if we are to fulfil our responsibility to our graduates, we must find a way to ensure that our students are given both the opportunity and the incentive to consider carefully the ‘mental pictures’ that inform their decisions. Fortunately, art, design and media programmes are ideal environments in which to do so.

At the heart of contemporary commercial art, design and media practice is the notion of ‘compelling narratives’: the ‘stories’ we tell about products, services and ideas. In studying these subjects, our students must be encouraged to recognise and accept that, without the capacity to identify – and the inclination to reflect upon – how such messages have influenced their perceptions, they will be unable to make appropriate decisions about the design of materials that will affect others. The necessary examination of their own ‘mental pictures’ therefore lays the necessary cognitive foundation for the exploration of the broader applications and implications of narratives – including the inferences implicit within the dominant social narratives (including those for higher education) that would otherwise escape critical reflection and render alternative points of view literally ‘unthinkable’. If, however, we are to expect our students to identify and examine their own ‘mental pictures’, it is reasonable that we should be prepared to acknowledge our own – for how else are we to credibly demonstrate the importance of doing so, guide them in knowing where and how to look, or help them to understand the implications of what they find there? Do we, for example, think of our life as ‘a path to be explored’, ‘a journey to be enjoyed’, ‘a ladder to be climbed’, or ‘a competitive struggle against hostile forces to be won’? The way in which we ‘picture’ our goals determines the evidence we pursue in order to be successful – and what we pursue shapes the life we create.

By emphasising the relationship between ‘mental pictures’ and their implications, we are also able to address one of the most common reasons for poor retention: the complaint (as recorded in exit interviews with those who have withdrawn from their 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 from students confirms 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', this approach assists them in being able to make appropriate decisions, both in the design and development of effective art, design and media materials, and in matters that affect their lives. It is only by committing ourselves to recognise and explore the narratives that drive our decisions that we are able to identify personally fulfilling goals – and to create a life for ourselves in which we may achieve them. As a teacher, and, more importantly, as a fellow human being, I can think of no greater gift to offer.

### Rutherford [M.Phil, FHEA]

Programme leader – BA Advertising  
University of Chester

Contact information:

Faculty of Arts & Media  
University of Chester  
Crab Lane, Warrington  
Cheshire WA2 0DB  
E: rutherford@chester.ac.uk

### Biography

A writer, designer and photographer from Toronto, Canada, committed to raising awareness of the influence of visual and corporate communication on our mental pictures of Products, Politics and the Right Priorities, Rutherford's essays have featured in numerous international journals, newspapers and magazines. A Fellow of the HEA, Rutherford holds a Bachelor degree in Visual Art, a Diploma in Social Work and a Master's degree in Philosophy. Rutherford is currently Programme Leader of BA Advertising at the University of Chester.

Rutherford is the author of *The Shadow of the Photographer* about the connections between the contents of our casual photographic 'snapshots' and our (largely unconscious) 'picture' of the world. Rutherford's website: <http://www.theshadowofthephotographer.co.uk/>

### References

- Attwood, R. (2009, 11 June). 'Universities' out as DIUS is succeeded by business ministry. *Times Higher Education*
- Baker, S. (2010, 14 October). Lord of the market: let competition and choice drive quality. *Times Higher Education*
- Barnett, R. (1992). *Improving Higher Education*. Buckingham, SRHE and Open University Press.
- Boulding, K. (1956). *The Image*. Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press.
- Burke, V. Jones, I. and Doherty, M. (2005). Analysing student perceptions of transferable skills via undergraduate degree programmes. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 6, 132
- Clark, B. (1983). *The Higher Education System: academic organization in cross-national perspective*. London, University of California Press.
- Curtis, P. (2009, 03 November). Mandelson to announce plans to modernise 'ivory tower' universities: Business secretary wants students and parents to be treated more like customers in proposals to overhaul higher education. *The Guardian*
- D'Andrea, V. and Gosling, D. (2001). Joining the Dots: Reconceptualizing Educational Development. *Active Learning in Higher Education*. 2, 64
- Entwistle, N. (1991) Approaches to learning and perceptions of the learning environment, *Higher Education*, 22.
- Fitzmaurice, M. (2008). Voices from within: teaching in higher education as a moral practice, *Teaching in Higher Education*. 13: 3, 341 - 352.
- Grayling, AC., (2009, 10 November). Universities are not there to spoon-feed: Peter Mandelson wants more contact hours in higher education, but this would reduce students' ability to think for themselves. *The Guardian*
- Jarvis, P. Holford, J. Griffin, C. (1998). *The Theory and Practice of Learning*. London, Kogan Page.
- Knight, P. and Yorke, M. (2003). Employability and Good Learning in Higher Education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol. 8, No. 1
- Mandelson, P., letter to Tim Melville-Ross, Chairman, Higher Education Funding Council for England. 22 December 2009
- Northumbria University, on behalf of JISC Advance. 2009. Retrieved 24 October, 2010 from JISC Infonet website: [www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/e-portfolios/drivers](http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/e-portfolios/drivers)
- Rutherford (2008). Mental pictures: citizen or consumer?. *Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health*, Vol. 128, No. 4
- Rutherford (2010, 04 February). (reader's comment on) School of Communication Arts - 'Mad Men' for a new era. *Times Higher Education*
- Shumar, W. (1997). *College for sale: A critique of the commodification of higher education*. London, Falmer Press.