

Teaching by Story

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Abstract

The way in which we ‘mentally picture’ (IMAGiNE) what something ‘is’ determines what it is ‘for’ (Boulding, 1956), and this, in turn, shapes our assumptions and decisions in our efforts to achieve it. As a consequence of the way in which the purpose of higher education is defined (and its value measured) by pundits, politicians (and even by some university administrators), many students have been ‘taught’ to IMAGiNE it as ‘a service to be provided’ – something ‘done to’ students to improve their job prospects within their chosen careers. Implicit within this conception of HE is the assumption that it demands the same (minimal) level of engagement by its ‘customers’ as any other. As a result, the ‘picture’ of both *the purpose of higher education* and *who is responsible for providing it* with which many students now arrive at university makes it both less likely that they will develop a proactive and self-directed approach towards learning and reduces the prospect that they will realise its benefits.

To counter the influence of this ‘mental picture’ of higher education and engage our students ‘meaning-fully’ in the learning environment, we must be able to offer them a different ‘picture’ of education – and one that gives them a reason to commit to it. I will suggest that we can do so by helping students to understand how the core professional skills are relevant to their lives.

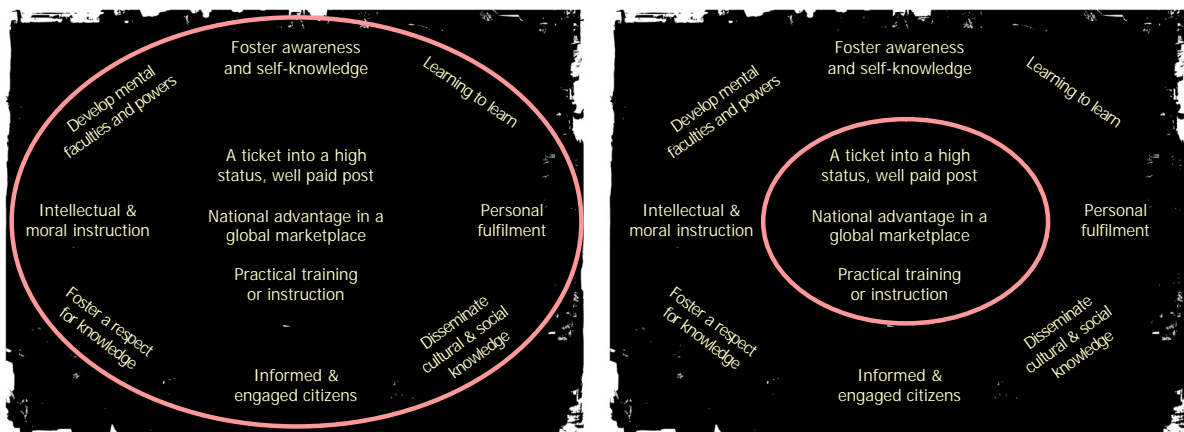
Key words: ‘mental picture’ of higher education, relevance, engagement, customer satisfaction

Introduction

There is a growing tension in HE between, on one side, the need to compete for ‘customers’ – and on the other, the belief that higher education should be – and should provide – more than just ‘job training’ to equip graduates for the competitive global marketplace. (And, in case you are tempted to assume that I speak to you from some Humanist discipline currently under threat to justify its practical and economic relevance... I teach advertising and branding.)

What, then, is higher education ‘for’?

It all depends who defines it.



In his recent plea to reclaim the idea of universities as institutions for “conserving, understanding, extending and handing the intellectual, scientific, and artistic heritage of mankind”, Collini 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 (Collini, 2012)

While I accept without hesitation or reservation that HE has a responsibility to prepare its graduates to be able to pursue rewarding and economically productive careers, those of us who agree with Collini that HE should nevertheless be more than this (that it should also enable and encourage graduates to become both self-aware individuals and informed citizens) are confronted with two significant obstacles:

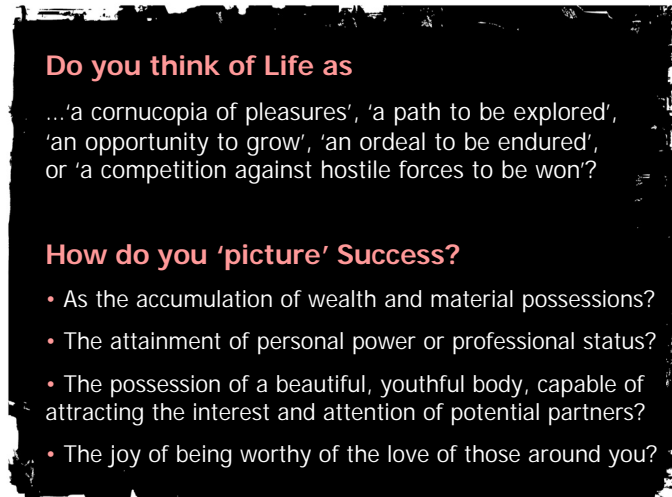
1. The ‘mental picture’ of higher education with which many students arrive at university
2. And, secondly, the pressure to reduce higher education to ‘job training’ by focussing on the acquisition of practical skills in the short-sighted pursuit of ‘customer satisfaction’.

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 acquiring the skills identified as essential by industry.

I will then suggest how we might profitably challenge the first – in order to constructively address the second.

The ‘mental picture’ of higher education with which many students arrive at university

The use of ‘mental pictures’ is the oldest form of human cognition: our most basic way of knowing what something is. In other words, what we think of something is determined by how we mentally ‘picture’ it. Or, as Boulding (1956) observed, the way in which we IMAGINE or ‘mentally picture’ what something ‘is’ determines what it is ‘for’, and this, in turn, shapes our assumptions and decisions in our efforts to achieve it.



Boulding’s (1956) insight, (as well as everything we know about advertising) tells us that, as a consequence of the way in which higher education is repeatedly described, its purpose defined, its value measured and its beneficiaries identified, students have ‘learned’ (or, more accurately, been ‘taught’) that higher education is “a mercantile service for which they are paying” (and, due to the increasing dominance of neoliberal economic models that ‘define’ students rather than society as its primary beneficiaries, paying handsomely¹). Thus defined as a service (such as those provided by other professionals – dentists or auto mechanics), students are increasingly ‘taught’ to IMAGINE that HE demands the same (minimal) level of involvement by its ‘customers’ as any other. As a result of these ‘Messages’, students (and, again, many university administrators) ‘see’ and the quality of *the service we provide* as the product of the teacher’s efforts rather than students’ own.

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. (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 the extent of their individual responsibility for achieving these.) 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.

¹ Until recently, this phenomenon has been restricted primarily to universities in Anglophone societies. In continental Europe (where higher education is more widely defined as a social good and therefore enjoys widespread public support for state funding), university programmes are largely restricted to the liberal arts and the ‘pure’ or investigative sciences, while vocational/professional programmes are delivered in private institutions. Following the election of ‘pro-market’ governments however, this now seems likely to change.

The second obstacle we face is:

The pressure to reduce higher education to ‘job training’

Whereas the value or ‘quality’ of HE programmes had previously been defined and maintained by a rigorous process of peer review (Clark, 1983), ‘quality’ is now assessed according to two very different criteria: the unit cost at which large numbers of students can be successfully promoted (or ‘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”).

As a result, 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 the focus of learning outcomes as well as the criteria by which work is assessed... should keep the customers ‘happy’, ensure positive evaluations of our programmes and maximise student retention.

In addition therefore to its implications for the attitude of students towards their studies, Boulding’s insight also has implications for our efforts to improve levels of student engagement and achievement. Is it our objective to improve the market position of the department or university – or to enhance the capability of students to make informed decisions as professionals, as citizens and as individuals?

The Higher Education Academy (2010) 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)

As a consequence of the widespread adoption of the Market Model, this has led to pressure on programmes to withdraw those assessments on which students consistently perform poorly, and to replace these with assessment tasks more closely aligned with students’ existing abilities and current low levels of engagement in order to ensure that the majority will pass.

Admittedly, such ‘realignments’ are 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: As a consequence of such changes, 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.

In my regular conversations with the representatives of the creative industries with whom we collaborate, I am constantly reminded that, while practical skills are important, the most important skills & aptitudes industry requires us to foster are of a much higher order. Our graduates require:

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 in order to contribute to the development of their organisations” (Harvey et al., 1997).

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, Harvey et al., 1997). 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.

By ‘realigning’ what we teach (and therefore both what and how we assess) in pursuit of customer satisfaction not only deprives students of the opportunity to develop the cognitive skills that are 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 programmes and their assessments focus on the acquisition of practical skills – and industry’s demand for employees who can think. In other words, it is not only our students’ ‘mental pictures’ of education that threaten our ability to foster, and the capacity of students to develop, the higher level cognitive skills deemed essential by industry, but those of policymakers in government and universities as well.

Instead, I submit that 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 industries our programmes are required to serve. In other words, we must ‘teach them how to fish’.

Ramsden wrote:

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, 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’.

I call my suggestion:

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To enable them to pursue rewarding careers (during in which they will change careers several times during their lives) and to lead fulfilling lives, we must provide our students with more than just practical skills – we must be able to offer them 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, 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. To do so, communication and design programmes should begin by leading students to examine their own ‘mental pictures’ and to recognise how these have shaped their assumptions, decisions and behaviours about what it means to be a student.

Central to contemporary media practice is the notion of compelling narratives: the ‘stories’ we tell about ideas, people, places and events. Students of communication and design are (or should be) obliged to accept that, without the capacity to identify – and the inclination to reflect critically upon – how their ‘mental pictures’ 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*, – they will be unable to produce materials that will likewise affect others.

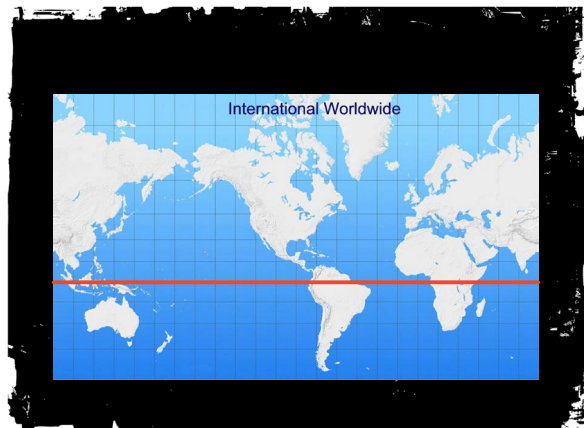
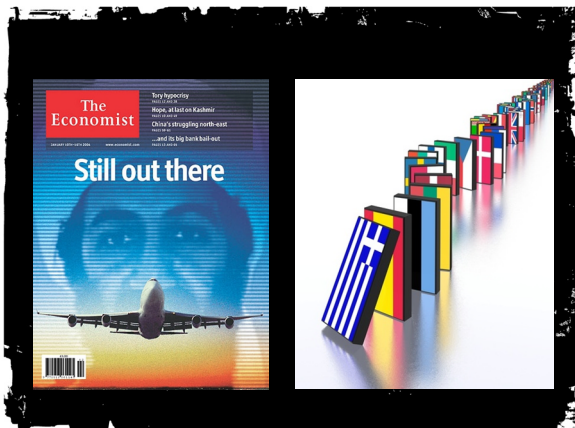
Doing so will not only provide them with the means and incentive to develop the ability to understand and acquire the skills needed to succeed in their chosen professions, but will also improve our students’ levels of engagement – by showing them how the (admittedly challenging) cognitive skills required for their chosen professions are also those needed to make informed choices in both the public and private spheres.

Within an advertising programme, this means that, in addition to teaching advertising from a corporate perspective (what we call *How we, as advertisers, Do It to audiences*), we must also help our students 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 will not only provide the skills needed by industry, but also 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)

Examples of “graphic propositions”



By leading our students to explore their ‘mental pictures’, we have also been 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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