

Why Advertising Students Should be Required to Write

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Abstract

Central to contemporary advertising practice is the notion of compelling narratives: the 'stories' we tell about products, brands and ideas. In order to make informed and appropriate decisions in the conception and design of messages, materials and strategies that will affect or persuade, advertising students must be able to recognise, understand and convey the meaning and implications of information. Unfortunately, a significant proportion of entrants to art, design and media programmes arrive without these skills. This article argues that an effective way to engage and assist our students in learning to work with meaning (how to find it, understand it and express it), is to provide them with both the opportunity and the incentive to improve their ability to write.

Introduction

As teachers, we cannot make it rain, but we can see to it that the rain falls on prepared soil. (Nouwen, cited by Tracy, 2008)

As Boulding (1956) observed, the way in which we imag(in)e what something 'is' determines what it is 'for', and this, in turn, shapes our assumptions and decisions in our efforts to achieve it. In *Networks 12* (spring 2011), I suggested that, as a result of the way in which politicians, pundits and popular entertainment define and describe the purpose of higher education, students, parents (and even some university administrators) now imag(in)e HE solely as something 'done to' students to improve their job prospects within their chosen careers.

While we accept that HE has a responsibility to prepare graduates for employment, if they are to have the skills needed by the creative industries – and to succeed within a job market in which they will change careers several times during their lives – graduates require more than just practical skills, they must be able to reason: to recognise important information, to understand its implications, and to use this knowledge to generate innovative

and appropriate solutions. However, despite the persistent demands by employers in all sectors for graduates who can *think* and *learn* (Harvey et al., 1997), in the short-sighted pursuit of improved pole positions and positive reviews on the NSS by happy customers, there has been mounting pressure to eliminate assignments that require students to consider, to develop and to convey ideas in favour of those in which the majority can do well with minimal effort. This trend not only deprives graduates of the opportunity to develop the skills needed to pursue rewarding careers in the creative industries, but makes HE complicit in endorsing a limited – and limiting – ‘mental picture’ of what learning ‘is’, how it happens and who is responsible for it.

To sustain a high quality student experience, we must not fall into the trap of [seeing] 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. [This] 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).

This ‘picture’ of the purpose of HE exacerbates two longstanding problems: students’ lack of engagement in the learning environment, and the extent to which they are able to realise (in both senses) its – and their – objectives. This article suggests that we can improve both by requiring students to write.

Teaching advertising through ‘mental pictures’

Although the way in which many students currently IMAG(in)E HE is a significant obstacle to ‘meaning-full’ learning, advertising programmes are an ideal environment in which to explore, and even counter its influence by offering our students a different ‘picture’ of education, and one that gives them a reason to commit to it.

Several studies (Crumpton and Gregory, 2011; Entwistle, et. al., 2002; Hockings et. al., 2008; Sanacore, 2008; Thomas and Jamieson-Ball, 2011, Yorke and Longden, 2008) have shown that student engagement depends on the extent to which they perceive material to be ‘relevant’. It may be, however, that, under pressure to focus on providing job skills, we are neglecting to make course material demonstrably relevant to their *lives*.

Central to contemporary advertising practice is the notion of compelling narratives: the ‘stories’ told about products, brands and social ideologies in an effort to shape the attitudes of target audiences. If our graduates are to be able to make informed decisions in the design of effective strategies, messages and materials, they must be able to identify – and reflect critically upon – the influence of advertising messages on *their* ‘mental pictures’ – including *why* they want *what* they want. Put another way, if our students are not able to recognise *how* and *why* advertising materials have affected *them*, they will be unable to produce materials that will likewise affect others. Advertising and design programmes can, therefore, improve our students’ levels of engagement and their industry knowledge by providing them with the means to identify, and the incentive to examine, their own ‘mental pictures’ – beginning with how these have shaped their assumptions, decisions and behaviours about education, learning and what they think it means to be a student.

To assist our students in seeing how this material is relevant to their lives, in addition to teaching advertising from a corporate perspective (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 consider critically the ideologies implicit within advertising messages and their impact on our perceptions of Products, Politicians and the Right Priorities, we will also prepare our graduates for the challenges of shaping the world we will not live to see.

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).

As indicated by the faculties within which advertising programmes are delivered, however, approximately two thirds of UK universities 'picture' or define (and therefore teach) the subject of advertising as a sub-discipline of marketing, and the others define (and therefore teach) the subject as a sub-discipline of graphic design. The former produce the 'suits' responsible for account and brand management (the 'Mad Men'); the latter produce the designers who create materials based on the briefs prepared by the former.

For two reasons, I believe that it is contrary to the interests of our students as well as to the industries they hope to enter to oblige applicants to choose naïvely between these two 'pathways':

- 'Suits' must understand the principles of effective (and affective) visual communication, and 'creatives' must understand the strategic objectives of the Brand their work is expected to support and advance. Taught in isolation, 'suits' and 'creatives' are unlikely to develop sufficient familiarity with the objectives and challenges of the other to be able to collaborate effectively.
- Applicants cannot be expected to know enough about either of these two 'pathways' – or about themselves – to be able to make an informed decision as to which is most appropriate for them.

In contrast to the 'either-or' model of other universities, our advertising programme at the University of Chester explores the practice and implications of advertising and branding through three symbiotic notions:

1. advertising as a corporate activity (the development of appropriate strategies and 'messages' for audiences);
2. advertising as affective visual communication (the conception and design of appropriate materials); and,
3. advertising as social narrative (the critical examination of advertising messages and their influence on our perceptions of Products, Politics and the Right Priorities).



Figure 1: Three symbiotic aspects of advertising (© Rutherford)

To assist our students in making informed decisions about What to say about the product or brand, How to design materials that say it, and to understand Why its messages affect us, we must help them to develop the capacity to *recognise*, to *understand*, and to *communicate* meaning.

Communication as a 'meta-skill'

In our programme, we have four broad objectives for our students; that they should become:

1. Successful professionals, able to make informed decisions in the pursuit of a fulfilling, self-directed career;
2. Self-aware individuals, able to make informed decisions in the pursuit of a fulfilling, self-directed Life;
3. Engaged citizens, able to make informed decisions in the interests of the Common Weal; and,
4. Capable and enthusiastic lifelong learners, committed to the pursuit of all of the above.

If one understands an idea, one can explain it – conversely, if one does not, one cannot. ('If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.' Albert Einstein) We have found that requiring our students to use language to describe, explain and justify their strategic (Why have you chosen this message?) and creative (Why have you used this layout?) decisions obliges them to think more clearly and critically. Without the ability to express meaning in language, students are not only unable to communicate their ideas to others, but are limited in their ability to even conceive of appropriate solutions. ('Language serves not only to express thought – but to make possible thoughts which could not exist without it.' Bertrand Russell) Accordingly, the ability to use language is a 'meta-skill' upon which our ability to recognise and understand meaning, and apply this understanding in making informed decisions in the conception and design of effective materials, both depend.

Unfortunately, a significant proportion of students entering HE art, media and design programmes do not understand what meaning 'means' and so are unable to:

- recognise or identify the relevant/essential information;
- understand the meaning and implications of information; or,
- explain the meaning or significance of information in clear and coherent English.

While these are serious obstacles within any programme of study, in advertising, they preclude the acquisition of the critical thinking skills necessary to make informed decisions in either the 'strategic' or the 'creative' domain, or to engage in critical self-reflection. To assist our students in developing these skills, our teaching and learning strategy (how we present information, the assignments we set, and what we expect in submissions) is modelled on The Trivium: the medieval curriculum of Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric:

- *The Grammar of the subject*
refers to the structure of knowledge: the relevant information and its application(s) that we must understand in order to use it effectively;
- *The Logic of the subject*
refers to the capacity to think critically about this information, including its meaning(s) and implication(s);
- *The Rhetoric of the subject*
refers to the way this information is presented, and how this affects our perceptions of its meaning.



Figure 2: The Modern Rhetorician [online image]. (Source: http://www.getting-medieval.com/my_weblog/2007/10/index.html) [Accessed 11 July 2011]

By emphasising the relationship between information and its use or application, we have found that this approach leads our students to be able to 'see' or IMAG(in)E how each 'atom of information' (a fact, a theory, a strategy or a technique) builds towards a larger 'molecule of understanding' and so helps them to improve their ability to recognise, understand and convey meaning in both 'strategic' and 'creative' projects, as well as in matters that affect their lives. Further, this emphasis on the relationship between material and its meaning has helped us to address one of the most common reasons for poor 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'.

This way of presenting material not only makes it easy to absorb, but does so in a way that engages the class by considering the broader implications of the matters being discussed until complicated concepts are fully understood (University of Chester Advertising student, 2010).

How writing improves designers' ability to learn

There is a widespread (and, to my mind, inexplicable) resistance to the suggestion that designers should be asked to write.

For the following five reasons we believe it valuable to require students to identify and explain in writing (and, by explaining, to demonstrate that they understand) the meaning, application and implications of information:

1. The ability to communicate clearly and effectively in language is consistently identified by employers in all sectors as an essential skill – but one that most graduates lack;
2. Both of the career paths available in advertising ('suits' and 'creatives') require the ability to recognise, understand and express the meaning of information, to make appropriate decisions based on this, and to critically evaluate their work to ensure its consistency with the requirements of the brief;
3. By bringing vague or erroneous understandings to our attention, the written explanation of ideas, processes and consequences provides both students and their lecturers with an opportunity to recognise the gaps or weaknesses in their comprehension of the topic and so enables us (students and lecturers) to take the appropriate remedial actions;

4. The ability to express our ideas in language helps to bring to conscious attention the often unexamined assumptions ('mental pictures') on which our actions are based – thereby rendering us less susceptible to the dangers of logical fallacies and the manipulation of our perceptions by interest groups (see Orwell's *Politics and the English Language* (1957), and Hayakawa's *Language in Thought and Action* (1978), and;
5. The development of writing skills fosters the capacity for self-reflective thinking which is essential for an awareness of how we learn, thereby enabling us to become better lifelong learners.



Figure 3: Building 'molecules of understanding' (Image © Rutherford)

To provide our students with helpful guidance in advance of written submissions (the majority of which are not traditional academic essays, but include progress reports for group projects, strategy documents, visual analyses and reflective writing), students are required to prepare Outlines for formative feedback.

Brief, schematic descriptions of the content the student proposes to include in the assigned text, the requirement to submit preliminary Outlines has two significant advantages:

- the preparation of Outlines obliges students to think carefully and make considered decisions about three important aspects of the text: the topics or categories of information to be addressed (what they will talk about), the nature of the information they propose to provide (what they will say about these topics), as well as the order, sequence and structure in which the information will be provided;
- usually fewer than 150 words, Outlines allow us to provide prompt and valuable formative feedback on these three important aspects of students' work prior to submission for summative assessment.

Topic: Lorem ipsum dolor suscipit lobortis aliquip

Thesis Statement

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I The Left and Right hemispheres

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II The perceptual & psychological impact of visual communication

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III How visual communication is used to shape our perceptions

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IV The implications for the individual and Society

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Conclusion

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Figure 4: Outline for document

A final word about assessment

Being able to identify what a student does and does not understand is essential to enable effective teaching and learning and for meaningful ('constructively aligned') assessment. However, as a result of most students' previous experience with assessment, I have found that it is both helpful and necessary to offer students a different 'mental picture' of the purpose of assignments.

From the outset of their studies, our students are assured that the purpose of assessment is not to 'rate' or 'label' them (with all the implications for fragile egos this entails), but to provide both of us (teacher and student) with an accurate indication of what they do – and do not yet – understand as a basis for subsequent in-class review and personal revision. Reminding them that, if one understands an idea, one can explain it (and conversely, that if one does not, one cannot), we explain that, until we have a better way to 'look inside their heads', the best means at our disposal to identify the gaps in their knowledge and understanding is to ask them to explain ideas in writing. Assessment is, therefore, not a judgement of their worth, but an integral part of the process of helping them to learn (and to learn *how* to learn).

As this conception, or 'picture' of the purpose of assessment is often radically different from their previous experience, it usually takes some time before they accept that we mean what we say, but, by the end of their first year, the majority come to believe that we are indeed committed to helping them learn.

Now, if we could only get them to read...

Biography

Committed to raising awareness of the influence of visual and corporate communication on our perceptions of Products, Politics and the Right Priorities, Rutherford's essays have featured in international journals and in several leading North American newspapers and magazines. A Fellow of the HEA, Rutherford holds a Bachelor degree in Visual Art, a Diploma in Social Work and Master's degrees in Philosophy and Education. Rutherford is currently Programme Leader of BA Advertising at the University of Chester:

<http://www.chester.ac.uk/undergraduate/advertising>

Rutherford is the author of *The Shadow of the Photographer* about the relationship between the contents of our casual photographic 'snapshots' and our (largely unconscious) 'picture' of the world. Rutherford's website:

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