

Rutherford - Statement of Undergraduate Teaching Philosophy in Advertising

My work in visual & corporate communication and education has developed through three phases:

- i. 12 years in commercial photography & design and part-time teaching
- ii. seven years in corporate communications
- iii. 14 years in HE, during which I designed and validated two undergraduate programmes (BA Advertising & BA Digital Photography) and contributed substantially to a third (BA Corporate Communications)

These three phases allowed me, first to develop, then to exploit, and now to explain, contextualise and assist my students in acquiring a multi-disciplinary understanding of the ways in which the social and ideological narratives conveyed through media materials shape the way in which we define ('mentally picture') our goals – as well as our perceptions of (and therefore our attitudes & behaviours towards) *Products, Politics and the Right Priorities*.

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.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Man's achievements rest upon the use of symbols. And those who rule the symbols, rule us.

Alfred Korzybski

As a teacher & programme designer, I am committed to assisting my students to see that – and to understand *how* – these 'mental pictures' shape both their 'self-theories' and their (and our audiences') perceptions of the worlds around and within them. (These issues are also the central focus of my research and publications.) Drawing on insights from anthropology, biology, communication theory, Korzybski's General Semantics, history, media studies, mythology and psychology, I lead students to explore the conception, application and interpretation of visual rhetoric & corporate narratives – and to consider their influence on our personal & social narratives as well as their implications for our development as communications professionals, as citizens and as individuals.

As indicated by the academic faculties within which UK advertising programmes are delivered however, most universities define (and therefore present and teach) the subject as a sub-discipline of business or marketing – while the others define (and therefore present and teach) the subject as a sub-discipline of graphic design. As a result, the first emphasise the skills needed by account executives, while the second prioritise the design skills of the 'creatives' who will produce materials in accordance with the strategic briefs prepared by former.

Based on my industry experience and research into student engagement, for two reasons I believe that HE programmes should not teach the complex skills required by these interdependent disciplines in isolation:

1. Account managers ('suits') must understand the principles of effective (and affective) visual design and communication – and designers must understand the strategic objectives their work is to support. As taught in isolation from one another in most programmes however, 'suits' and 'creatives' do not develop sufficient awareness of the essential concerns of the other to be able to collaborate meaningfully or effectively.
2. Given their age, knowledge of the discipline and level of personal development however, most applicants do not know enough about these two 'pathways', the particular skills & aptitudes they require – 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, the programme I designed explores the strategies, practices and implications of narratives and affective communication through the following three themes:

- i. *Advertising as a corporate activity* (the research, analytical and communication skills necessary to develop appropriate strategies and 'messages' for diverse audiences);
- ii. *Advertising as affective visual communication* (the design and production techniques necessary for the conception & execution of appropriate messages, as well as the effective use of media to deliver these); and,
- iii. *Advertising as a source of social narratives* (the critical examination of the influence of corporate speech on our perceptions of socio-economic ideologies, including *Products, Politics and the Right Priorities*).

The symbiotic exploration of these three perspectives at all levels has enabled the programme to achieve the three objectives I believe to be essential for graduates; that they should be both equipped and committed to become:

- Competent media professionals, in conscious & confident possession of the subject-specific and transferable skills necessary to successfully pursue an economically viable and personally fulfilling self-directed career,
- Informed and engaged citizens, capable of and committed to making informed & constructive contributions to their respective communities,
- Reflective, self-aware individuals & capable lifelong learners, able to make informed and appropriate decisions in the creation of a fulfilling and self-directed Life.

Central to contemporary advertising, media and communications practice is the notion of compelling narratives: the ‘stories’ we tell about ideas, products, people, places and events. If we are to adequately prepare our graduates to succeed in the creative industries, they must (or should be) obliged to accept the importance of identifying – and reflecting critically upon – how the ‘stories’ implicit within corporate media products have influenced their perceptions of the worlds around (and within) them. Without doing so, they will be limited in their ability to make appropriate or effective decisions in the conception and execution of materials that will likewise affect others. In other words, if our students are not both able and prepared to recognise how and why such ‘stories’ have affected them – including why they make the decisions they do – they will make lousy storytellers.

Unfortunately, a significant proportion of students arrive in our programmes without the cognitive skills to do this, the language skills on which these depend, or, more troubling still, the inclination to engage with the learning environment and to invest the time and effort necessary (including the inclination *to read*) to develop these.

In our efforts to lead our students to develop the cognitive, critical and creative skills and inclinations required for successful careers in the creative industries, communication and design programmes have a particular advantage: the development of the critical skills essential for their professional career prospects (to understand how these ‘stories’ or narratives shape our attitudes and behaviours) are the same as those required for successful learning.

According to numerous studies, the single most significant influence on levels of student engagement, learning and achievement is the extent to which our students perceive material to be ‘relevant’. I have embedded this insight in three central features of the BA Advertising programme I designed for the University of Chester:

i) *The use of project-based assessment using ‘live’ briefs as a tool for collaborative learning*

To assist students in recognising the connection between the programme’s learning objectives and what they are asked to ‘do’, I have embedded project-based assessment (‘learning by doing’) in all three levels of the programme, using ‘live’ briefs I negotiate with SMEs, advertising agencies, national & local charities – and other offices/departments within the university.

These projects provide the opportunity to lead students to understand how (what I call) ‘atoms of information’ (strategies, research data, techniques and the results of trials) are used to build (what I call) ‘molecules of understanding’. The feedback from students confirms that, by helping them to recognise the connection between project objectives and what they are asked to do, this makes their learning ‘relevant’ and assists them in being able to make informed decisions – both in the conception of effective (and affective) communication materials for diverse audiences and in matters that affect their lives.

This approach has enabled our programme to avoid major problems with retention. As noted in exit interviews with those who have withdrawn from other programmes, a common complaint is that they “*could not see the point of what they were asked to do*”, or “*how it all fits together*”. Mine do.

ii) *Leading students to see the link between their ability to use language and their ability to think critically*

If our graduates are to be adequately prepared to meet the demands of the creative industries, students in communication, media & design programmes must be able to identify, critically reflect upon and (as evidence of their understanding) articulate how the ‘stories’ implied within media products influence our perceptions the meaning of ideas and information (including the link between these ‘stories’ and the way we think and act). Without the capacity to do so, they will be limited in their ability to make – or to critically assess/evaluate – appropriate and effective decisions in the conception & execution of materials that will affect others. It has been noted however, that an increasing number of students arrive at university without the cognitive skills to recognise, understand & convey meaning, the language skills on which the acquisition of these skills depend (or, it seems, the inclination to invest the time and effort necessary to develop them).

Note: As a consequence of the increasing proportion of students who arrive at university without the cognitive or language skills necessary to interrogate meaning, an appreciation of the importance of doing so, or the commitment to acquire such skills, it may be time to reconsider our use of the term 'non-traditional backgrounds' to acknowledge that, as such students now represent a large (and growing) proportion of those entering higher education, these are the new 'traditional' students.

In order to improve (and make 'relevant') their ability to make and critically evaluate appropriate and effective decisions in the conception & execution of materials, I have embedded (and constructively aligned with the defined learning objectives of project-based assessment) the requirement that students in all three levels of the programme improve their ability to recognise and explain in writing the meaning of 'atoms of information' so as to assist them in being able recognise and test their 'molecules of understanding'.

iii) *Leading students to 'see' assessment as an integral to their ability to learn – and to learn how to learn*

Based on their prior experience, students often 'mentally picture' assessment as a means to judge or 'label' them with all the implications for fragile egos this entails. The use of constructively aligned project-based assessment enables us to 're-frame' their understanding of the purpose of assessment and provides both of us – students and staff – with an accurate indication of what they do – and do not yet – understand as a guide for both the students' self-directed learning as well as our subsequent in-class review of material.

The resulting programme has been highly commended by senior industry leaders, management, External Examiners and students for its innovative curriculum (including its central emphasis on the use of narratives in shaping perceptions), its pedagogical rigour, its ability to engage and support students in both their personal & professional development and (as a result of my commitment to the use of 'live' briefs negotiated with external organisations), for raising the profile of the programme and the university within the wider community.

Success in the advertising and branding industries depends on the ability to develop powerful narratives. In my opinion, too few programmes adequately address this in their curricula. The programme Rutherford has designed is unique in its commitment to assisting his students to develop these skills. I would be surprised if his model was not copied by others.

Tim Sharp, Creative Director – [Uniform](#)

The advertising students at Chester displayed a breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding of the role of narratives in shaping attitudes and behaviours. While, in our experience, most HE courses have yet to respond adequately to this challenge, Rutherford's programme is pro-actively future-proofing his students' skills in this regard.

Steven Johnson, Director – [Collaborative Change](#)

The main difference with other programmes is Rutherford's refreshing and commendable commitment to running regular live briefs to prepare his students for the challenges that lie ahead. His understanding of the value of professional, real world exposure and his ability to push the boundaries of his students' abilities has significantly enhanced their learning.

David Thompson, Design Director – [Telling Stories](#)

I was impressed to discover that, from a digital perspective the course has the essential skills I look for at the core of the programme with the main emphasis put on the approach, the planning, rationale & the ability to tell the story to the client and get them to believe in your idea. [His students] demonstrated this particularly well and possessed those skills.

Stuart Kay, Digital Director – The Raft

The ability to both understand and develop compelling narratives is essential for any graduate considering entry into the creative industry. In my opinion, too few university programmes acknowledge this directly. I believe that the programme Rutherford has designed is unique in its commitment to helping his students to develop these skills.

Warren Gaskell, Creative Director – [GyroHSR](#)

New dynamics, changing consumers and changing values have all changed the industry, yet too few courses have adapted. The programme Rutherford developed at Chester is designed around the way things are, not the way they were.

Chris Arnold, [Creative Orchestra](#) (former Creative Director – Saatchi & Saatchi)

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