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Higher Education and the American Dream: Success and its Discontents - Comments

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- **Rutherford** 17 September, 2010

The "vocationalism" of higher education of which Lazerson laments is, I believe, the consequence of the increasingly prevalent 'mental picture' of education constantly reinforced by parents, politicians, entertainment, media commentators (and, God help us all, university Vice-Chancellors) as a mercantile commodity: a product to be 'bought'.

The use of 'mental pictures' is the oldest form of human cognition: our most basic way to know what something 'is' – through which we implicitly define (from Latin: 'to draw a line around') its meaning or significance. In other words, what we think of something is determined by the way in which we mentally 'picture' (or IMAGInE) it.

Think of 'home', 'holidays' or 'the ideal student' – and your mind will spontaneously summon up a visual image. Hold this picture in your mind and examine it carefully: the image you see 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 or notion it represents. (Imagine 'a terrorist' and notice how the individual visual elements of your mental image symbolically represent its negative connotations. Now imagine 'a welfare recipient': do you 'see' a major corporation or financial institution benefiting from government grants worth millions of pounds – or do you 'see' a single mother living on a council estate?)

As a consequence of the 'mental picture' with which many students arrive each September, they assume that HE requires the same (minimal) level of involvement or commitment demanded of the consumers of any other service: Pay your money, and the service will be provided 'for' you (on a platter). In addition, according to exit interviews, a common complaint among those withdrawing from programmes of study is their frustration and difficulty in "seeing how it all fits together..." I believe that this 'consumerist' metaphor for HE (which defines both what it is 'for' and how it is supposed to happen) is the root of both of these problems now confronting us: the minimal level of student engagement, and their difficulty in seeing the purpose of what we ask them to do – both of which contribute to unsatisfactory levels of student retention.

I believe that we can (and must) address both problems by helping them to see the connections between what they 'do' in our modules – and their ability to become:

- Successful professionals
- Self-aware individuals
- Informed & engaged citizens, and
- Lifelong learners

To assist them in doing so, for the following two reasons, we need to encourage students to recognise and reflect on their own personal narratives (or, in Postman's term, their "stories"):

1. Without an awareness of their personal metaphors for learning (what it 'is', how it happens, who is responsible for it, and how they can use or apply what they know), many will be unable to 'see' the connections between (or even the point of) what we ask them to do.
2. Without an appreciation of how they have been affected by the mental pictures they have inherited, and how these have shaped the way in which they IMAGInE their world, they will be unable to make informed and appropriate decisions as professionals, individuals or as citizens of this planet – decisions that will shape not only the lives they will lead – but the state of the world they will leave behind.

This widespread 'consumerist' mental picture for education has led to a set of beliefs and assumptions about the respective roles and responsibilities of student, institution and lecturer that implicitly minimises the nature and degree of their individual responsibility for achieving its goals, thereby making it less likely that students will develop a proactive and self-directed approach towards learning. If we are to engage our students in the learning environment, we must offer them a different 'picture' of education: one whose benefits are clearly related to their lives, experiences and aspirations.

With thanks and best regards,
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