

WHY I TEACH

As one aware of both the role and the influence of the corporate visual media in eliciting the public's uncritical endorsement of *Products, Politics* and *The Right Priorities*, I have four objectives for my students; that they should become:

1. Successful professionals, capable of making informed decisions in the pursuit of a fulfilling and self-directed career;
2. Self-aware individuals, capable of making informed decisions in the pursuit of a fulfilling and self-directed Life;
3. Informed and engaged citizens, capable of and committed to making informed decisions in the interests of the Common Weal, and;
4. Committed and enthusiastic lifelong learners, capable and desirous of making informed decisions in the pursuit of all of the above.

It has been my experience however, that a large proportion of students come to university with a 'mental picture' of both higher education and learning that does not lead to a sufficiently active engagement with – or an adequate degree of individual responsibility for – their own learning.

As Boulding (1956) observed, the way in which we IMAGINE ('mentally picture') what something 'is' determines what it is 'for', and this, in turn, shapes the decisions we make in an effort to achieve it. Constantly reinforced by the way in which its goals are defined and its effectiveness measured by parents, politicians, pundits, movies/television (and, God help us all, even some Vice-Chancellors), students have been 'taught' to IMAGINE (and therefore to define) higher education as 'a service to be provided': one that demands the same (minimal) level of engagement by its 'customers' as any other. The resulting assumptions of the role & responsibilities of both student and lecturer implicitly minimises both the nature and degree of students' individual responsibility for achieving it – thereby making it less likely that they will develop a proactive and self-directed approach towards learning. (If correct, this gives lie to the common complaint that students are "lazy"; they are not, but are simply responding appropriately to a very limited – and limiting – 'mental picture' of both the objectives of learning as well as their responsibility for achieving these.)

While this is a significant obstacle, I submit that an advertising communications programme offers an ideal environment in which to address these issues. At the heart of advertising practice is the notion of *compelling narratives*: the 'stories' we tell about products and services. In studying advertising, students are obliged to accept that, without the capacity to identify – and the inclination to reflect upon – how advertising messages have influenced their perceptions, they will be unable to make effective decisions in the design of materials that will likewise affect others. (If we can't recognise how we have been touched, we won't be able to touch others.) Leading students to explore their own 'mental pictures' therefore provides the necessary foundation to consider the broader applications and implications of narratives – including the ideological messages within corporate/political materials that would otherwise escape critical reflection, thereby rendering alternative points of view literally 'inconceivable'.

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

Since joining the University of Chester in 2005, several colleagues expressed surprise that I gave up the Côte d'Azur for the NorthWest of England. I did so in the hope and belief that this post would offer me the chance to design a programme in which to lead students to reflect critically on the role of narratives in corporate speech & visual design in shaping our 'mental pictures' for who and what we are, and for why we want what we want.

If we are to engage our students 'meaning-fully' in the learning environment, we must be able to offer them a different 'picture' of education: one that gives them a reason to commit to it. It follows therefore, that, if I am to ask students to examine their own narratives, it is reasonable that I should be prepared to acknowledge and examine my own – for how else am I to credibly demonstrate the importance of doing so, or be able to confidently guide them in knowing where and how to look, or to understand the implications of what they find there? The narrative or 'mental picture' that informs both my objectives and my methods is the **TRIVIUM** – the medieval curriculum of **LOGIC, GRAMMAR** and **RHETORIC**:

- ◆ **THE GRAMMAR OF THE SUBJECT** refers to the structure of knowledge: what we need to know, and the implications we must understand
- ◆ **THE LOGIC OF THE SUBJECT** refers to the capacity to think critically about this information as well as its meaning and its implications
- ◆ **THE RHETORIC OF THE SUBJECT** refers to the way this information is presented, and how this affects our perceptions of its meaning

By emphasising the relationship between facts and meaning, this approach addresses one of the most common reasons for poor retention: the complaint (as recorded in exit interviews with those who have withdrawn from programmes of study) that they could not 'see' the point of what they were asked to do or 'how it all fits together'. By helping them to recognise how each 'atom of information' (a fact, a theory, a strategy or a technique) builds towards a larger 'molecule of understanding', this approach appears to have been successful in assisting them in learning to make appropriate decisions – both in the design and development of effective communications materials, and in matters that affect their lives. Implicit in this model of teaching and learning is the tenet that, if one understands an idea, theory, consequence, or technique, one can explain it – and, conversely, that if one cannot, one does not. Accordingly, if our graduates are to be 'educated', for the following five reasons, I hold that it is necessary to provide them with both the opportunity and the incentive to improve their ability to use language:

1. The ability to communicate clearly and effectively in language is consistently identified as an essential skill by employers in all sectors – but one that most graduates lack;
2. Both of the career paths available in advertising ('Suits' & 'Creatives') require the ability to recognise 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 a brief;
3. The ability to express ideas in language helps to bring to conscious attention the often unexamined assumptions on which our actions are based – thereby rendering us less susceptible to the dangers of logical fallacies and the manipulation of our perceptions by special interests (see Orwell's *Politics and the English Language* and Hayakawa's *Language in Thought and Action*), and;
4. By bringing vague or erroneous explanations to our conscious attention, the written exposition of ideas, processes, implications or consequences provides both students and lecturers with an opportunity to recognise the gaps or weaknesses in their understanding, and therefore enables them (and us) to take the appropriate remedial actions;
5. The development of writing skills fosters the capacity for self-reflective thinking, essential for an awareness of how they learn, thus enabling them to become effective betterers lifelong learners.

As expressed by the founder of my 'school' (Peripatetic Rhetors Я Us), I agree with Socrates that:

The unexamined life is not worth living

And with the admonition engraved over the entrance to the shrine of Apollo at Delphi:

Know Thyself

I submit that it is only by committing ourselves to do so that we will be able to identify personally fulfilling goals – and to create a life for ourselves in which we may achieve these. As a teacher and, more importantly, as a fellow human being, I can think of no greater gift to offer.

Rutherford