

Improving Student Engagement in Commercial Art and Design Programmes

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Abstract

The continued viability of art and design programmes depends on our ability to produce graduates able to contribute successfully and confidently to the future of the creative industries. This in turn depends on our ability to lead students to develop both the ability and the motivation to learn. A significant proportion of our students however, are not adequately prepared or inclined to engage with the learning environment. Based on a review of the literature on student engagement, this article attempts to identify the origins and examine the impact of the perceptions and attitudes (the 'mental pictures') that currently limit our students' ability and inclination to engage as well as those factors (including the features of our programmes) through which these 'mental pictures' may be inadvertently reinforced. It then proposes a number of practical suggestions to make more effective use of the learning outcomes of art and design programmes in order to mitigate their influence and thereby improve both our graduates' capacity and incli-

nation to become more competent professionals, as well as self-directed learners.

Keywords

Student engagement, mental pictures, Market Model, neoliberal paradigm of higher education, making education relevant

Introduction

Despite its widely touted role in the creation of an active, effective and supportive learning environment ('the value of engagement is no longer questioned' Trowler & Trowler 2010b, 9), there is no clear consensus on the meaning of 'student engagement' (Bryson & Hand 2007, 352). The term has been defined in many ways (Leach & Zepke 2011, 194; Kahu 2013, 758), takes different forms in different disciplines (Brint *et al.* 2008, cited by Kahu 2013, 760), in different situations and contexts (Handley *et al.* 2011, 550), in pursuit of different objectives (Trowler & Trowler 2010a, 4) and is manifest in different ways by those with different learning styles (Stefani 2009, 3; Goldfinch & Hughes 2007). For example, while traditional academic disciplines look for evidence of independent, self-directed study, vocational subjects look for evidence of effective problem solving in the execution of collaborative projects that correspond to industry requirements.

Making useful discussion of student engagement even more problematic is the fact that the concept has been pressed into the service of such widely divergent (and sometimes incompatible) goals as improved market position (Kahu 2013, 763), the enhancement of graduates' employment prospects and the development of informed citizens. Consequently, some have suggested that 'the term has become a popular [but] empty and superficial catchphrase' (McMahon & Portelli 2004, 60).

One aspect on which there is consensus, however, is that student engagement cannot be measured directly (McGuinness 2007, 4; Richards *n.d.*, 5), but can only be inferred from observable behaviours such as regular attendance and participation in class, or from quantifiable outcomes such as improvement in marks. Genuine engagement may therefore be 'invisible' if students do not manifest the particular behaviours with which we (may mistakenly) equate it and expect them to manifest (Handley *et al.* 2011, 551).

Leaving aside the suggestion (Devlin *et al.* 2009, 109) that these behaviours and outcomes are favoured 'because they are relatively simple to gather and collate', our reliance on such easily quantifiable indicators risks conflating cause and

effect. As Zyngier (2008) and Postman (1996) have pointed out, the belief that such behaviours or outcomes can be taken as reliable evidence of student engagement can lead us to mistake a variety of phenomena for genuine engagement, including:

- students' superficial interest in the subject (Kahu 2013, 761; Renninger & Wade 2001, cited by Zyngier 2008, 1769),
- their motivation to complete tasks (McMahon & Portelli 2004, 63),
- their 'passive compliance' to institutional paradigms (Zyngier 2008, 1774), or
- their proclivity to simply 'play the game' (Zyngier 2008, 1769).

Accordingly, the temptation to believe that 'we know it when we see it' (Newmann 1986, 242), can effectively disguise the extent to which our students are engaged 'mind-fully' (Salomon & Globerson 1987, cited by Handley *et al.* 2011, 548) or are using a 'deep approach' in their studies (Marton & Saljo 1984, cited by Handley *et al.* 2011, 548).

While a great deal of research has been undertaken into the various ways in which we can support those students who arrive at university predisposed to engage with their studies, we still know very little about how to foster meaningful engagement among the large (and, it seems, growing) proportion of those who are not (Hancock 2002, 63). Further, Gibbs (cited by Parsons *et al.* 2012, 13) has warned that the available data cited in support of those pedagogical practices believed to engender student engagement are 'likely to be at best misleading and at worst inaccurate'.

While these are significant obstacles, this article will suggest that the responsibility to engender the particular skills and aptitudes required by the creative industries provides art and design programmes with an ideal opportunity in which to improve levels of engagement and thereby lead our graduates to become capable and committed self-directed lifelong learners.

The definition of 'student engagement' adopted in this article and which informs the

recommendations offered in an effort to increase it is taken from a report prepared by Thomas & Jamieson-Ball for the Higher Education Academy (HEA):

Engagement in the academic sphere refers to students' participation in educationally purposeful activities provided by the HEI in relation to ... assessment, feedback and academic development ... in which students construct knowledge through a more active and authentic learning process facilitated by academic staff, rather than relying on the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. (Thomas & Jamieson-Ball 2011, 22)

If we are to lead our students to become more engaged learners, we must begin by recognising the ways in which the current conception of higher education as a mercantile service, as well as its attendant policies and practices currently limit, or even actively discourage our students' ability and inclination to engage with our programmes and their learning environments. Drawing on inferences drawn from the literature, this article will consider these issues and their consequences in three contexts: their origins in the contemporary neoliberal paradigm of higher education, their impact on the design, delivery and assessment regimes of our programmes, and their implications for our graduates' professional prospects. This article will then offer ten practical suggestions to reduce the influence of this paradigm and provide our students with a greater incentive to engage more 'mind-fully' (Salomon & Globerson 1987, cited by Handley *et al.* 2011, 548) with the learning environment.

Mental pictures and their ideological implications

As observed by Boulding (1956), the way in which we imagine, or 'mentally picture' (Rutherford 2011) what something 'is' shapes our assumptions about what it is 'for', and this, in turn, informs our decisions in our efforts to achieve it.

With the rise to dominance of The Market™ as the ultimate arbiter of both purpose and

value (Newman and Courtourier 2002, 2–3), universities are now 'seen as' businesses providing a professional service to customers in exchange for a fee, and a degree as a financial investment in the acquisition of practical, professional skills that can be 'sold' in the market (Fitzmaurice 2008, 341). This 'commodification' of higher education (Shumar 1997, cited by Fitzmaurice 2008, 341) is not, of course, a recent phenomenon but is now a commodity of a very different kind – pursued by different strategies for different purposes, and assessed by different criteria. Consistent with Boulding's thesis, under the neoliberal paradigm, its objective has changed from the acquisition of knowledge and understanding (Collini 2012) to the ability to complete tasks (Stevens 1999, 26) – what Biggs (1987), termed 'surface' rather than 'deep' learning. Supported by inferences drawn from the literature, this article will suggest that this has led to two profound changes for art and design education: the way in which students 'picture' it, and way in which universities deliver it.

The impact on students' perceptions

Under this paradigm, students have learned (or, more accurately, have been taught) that higher education is a mercantile service – something that, for a fee, we do for them as a way to improve their employment prospects. The 'mental picture' of the purpose of higher education (what it is 'for') with which a majority of students (Newstead & Hoskins 2003, 63) now arrive in our programmes is the consequence of several factors, including:

- The way in which both its purpose is presented and its benefits framed by politicians, pundits and university marketing departments.
- Students' prior educational experience, in which 'teaching to the test' (Taber 2003) and for which they are 'spoon-fed' information (Grayling 2009) has become common in order to improve the standing of their schools in league tables on which schools' funding increasingly depends. In addition to its impact on students' skills and knowledge, Barnett

(1992, 160) has argued that this has led many students to confuse learning with the ability to produce 'correct' answers.

- The increase in tuition fees. With financial advantage now seen as the primary objective of higher education and graduates as its primary beneficiaries, it follows that students are expected to bear a greater share of its costs. (It remains to be seen to what extent this will reinforce students' 'mental picture' of university education as a mercantile service.)

Implicit within this neoliberal narrative is the suggestion that, like the services provided by other professionals (such as dentists or auto mechanics), it demands minimal involvement by its 'customers'. As a result, students' assumptions about both the nature and purpose of higher education as well as who is responsible for it not only makes it less likely that they will develop a proactive and self-directed approach towards learning, but reduces the prospect that they will realise (in both senses of the word) its benefits. If true, this gives the lie to the common complaint that students are 'lazy'. They are not; they are simply responding logically and appropriately to a very limited – and limiting – mental picture of what education 'is', how it happens, and the extent of their responsibility for achieving it.

The impact on the design and delivery of university programmes

The neoliberal paradigm has led to significant changes in both the reasons for which universities emphasise student engagement and the nature of the evidence by which it is determined.

Following the withdrawal of government funding, our programmes now depend on their ability to attract and retain fee-paying 'customers'. Central to the strategies for recruitment and retention is the demand by university administrations for those outcomes touted as evidence of learning and quality (Kuh 2009, cited by Kahu 2013, 758). Accordingly, what is taught how it is taught, and how student work is assessed is now subservient to, and evaluated in terms of, its impact on:

- the need to keep the 'customers' happy and,

- the requirement to ensure high marks by current students in support of the marketing strategy to attract new ones ('Come and study here because our students do so well...').

As a consequence, there has been an increase in the emphasis on practical skills as the basis of assessment (Stevens 1999, 26). It is surely not a coincidence that this change in the 'core knowledge and skills' to be assessed (Brown 2001, 6) tends to produce the higher marks and 'customer satisfaction' statistics now a priority in the effort to secure market share. As industry representatives regularly remind our students however, entry into, and success within, the creative industries demands knowledge and understanding of several complex factors and the ability to translate this into appropriate strategies and materials. By agreeing to set aside the traditional objectives of higher education to foster critical thinking by informed citizens and acceding to the pressure to award high marks for work that does not meet these standards, we give our students a false sense of the quality of their achievement. This will undermine both their career prospects as well as the continued viability of the industries to which they will be expected to contribute.

The implications for student engagement

The combination of these two phenomena (the significant difficulties in accurately determining whether, and to what extent, our students are engaged, and administrative imperatives to provide the outcomes touted as evidence of engagement) has encouraged the view that engagement is the 'result' of what the teacher 'does' (Stefani 2009, 3; Leach & Zepke 2011, 194–5; McMahon & Portelli 2004, 60). Implicit within this view of engagement is the politically expedient corollary that, if our students do not manifest the desired outcomes, the fault must lie with the teacher. According to Gibbs (cited by Parsons *et al.* 2012, 13), this conception of engagement is 'at best misleading and at worst inaccurate'. It can also be grounds for dismissal. As reported by the University and College Union (UCU), in December 2012, a lecturer was dismissed as result of unsatisfactory 'student

outcomes' although 'there were no conduct or management issues' (UCU 2013).

Ramsden (n.d., 16) warns that there is also a very significant risk that such a limited – and limiting – view of student engagement becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Despite the clear demands of the creative industries for graduates who can analyse, critique and synthesise information (Harvey *et al.*, as cited by Burke *et al.* 2005, 134), it is expected that the pressure on programmes to adopt assessment regimes intended to produce the required 'evidence' of engagement will only increase.

In the interests of our students' career prospects, the future of the industries they hope to enter and (for reasons I will explain in the next section), the long-term viability of our programmes, we must resist this 'mental picture' of education and the policies and practices to which it leads. As Barnett (1992, 15) has argued, to mitigate its impact on our students' attitudes and behaviours (McMahon & Portelli 2004, 62), we must be prepared to challenge the way(s) in which this narrative defines both the purpose of student engagement and the form(s) it is expected to take (Stefani 2009, 3–4). In Barnett's view:

If we believe, for example, that the quality of higher education is more demonstrated in the nature of the intellectual development that takes place in students' minds, in the depth and breadth of understanding that students achieve, in their ability to be self-critical, and in their capacity to apply that understanding and self-critical capacity to all they experience and do, then 'quality' of higher education takes on a quite different character. Under this conception of higher education, a proper appraisal of quality will not rest content with economic indicators of output. (Barnett 1992, 16)

Mental pictures and their pedagogical implications

Of course, Boulding's (1956) thesis not only applies to our students' assumptions about what learning 'is', how it happens and who is responsible for doing it, but to ours as well.

Among the ways in which the neoliberal paradigm shapes the learning environment for students, Stes *et al.* (2010, cited by Parsons *et al.* 2012, 15) identify its impact on teachers' conception of their roles and responsibilities (the 'changes in their ways of thinking about teaching and learning') which, in turn, affect their 'attitudes towards teaching and learning'. Accordingly, if we are to engender greater levels of student engagement, we must be prepared to recognise and consider the implications of the way(s) in which we 'picture' the purpose of higher education, as this informs both the strategies we employ as well as the evidence we use in assessing the success of our efforts.

For some in higher education, the primary goal of student engagement is to improve market position; for others, it is to enhance the capability of students to make informed decisions as professionals, as citizens and as individuals. The Higher Education Academy (2010, 3) describes the first as the Market Model of Student Engagement, and the second as the Developmental Model:

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)

For those whose goal is the first, priority will be given to strategies intended to generate favourable statistics and to produce 'happy customers' who will then provide positive reviews on national student surveys. For those whose goal is the second, priority will be given to strategies

that 'enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels [and] to contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment' (NCIHE [the Dearing Report], 1997, 5.11).

Unfortunately, the strategies through which these very different goals are pursued are not easily reconcilable and can even be in conflict. While the Market Model seeks to generate 'customer satisfaction' and the outcomes touted as proxies for student engagement and quality (Kuh 2009, cited by Kahu 2013, 759), the Developmental Model demands that graduates develop the skills deemed essential by the creative industries: the ability to analyse, critique and synthesise information (Harvey *et al.*, cited by Burke *et al.* 2005, 134).

The conflict between these two models is most evident in their very different objectives for the assessment of student work.

In order to attract and retain 'happy customers', the Market Model seeks to ensure that the majority receive a passing grade on assignments and that a significant proportion receive high marks. To achieve this however, two significant obstacles must be either overcome or ignored:

- students' prior educational experience, in which they have been led to confuse learning with the production of pre-defined responses (Barnett 1992, 160);
- the inclination of many students to do 'just enough to get by' (Kuh *et al.* 2006, 33).

Unfortunately, many of us have found that those assessments in which students are expected to demonstrate the skills required by industry (the ability to recognise, understand and make meaning) often result in very unhappy customers. As a result, programmes have come under increasing pressure to withdraw those assignments on which, due to the level of cognitive effort they demand, many students perform poorly, and replace these with tasks more likely to produce higher marks and happy customers [1].

Admittedly, such accommodations to Market Model imperatives would immediately produce three positive results: our students would be

happier (albeit by giving them a false indication of the value of their achievement), this would lead to improved rates of student satisfaction and retention, and this, in turn, would increase the income stream of our institutions and the job security of staff.

These ostensibly positive results would, however, come at a price: our programmes would no longer be able to ensure that graduates possess the 'knowledges', cognitive skills and attitudes demanded by the industries whose interests we are expected to serve. As a result, such accommodations would undermine the career prospects of our graduates and thereby the long-term viability of our programmes. (Or, as expressed in the terminology of the Market Model, such changes will fatally devalue our brand.) As Ramsden has argued:

To sustain a high quality student experience, 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, grumpily complaining about service standards, 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. (Ramsden n.d., 16)

If we are to avoid implicitly endorsing this limited and limiting view of higher education and assist our students in developing both a commitment to self-directed learning and the professional skills needed by the creative industries, we must be able to 'articulate a different view' (Ramsden n.d.) of learning: one that gives them a reason to commit to it.

A reason, as I use the word here, is different from [interest]: a temporary psychic event in which curiosity is aroused and attention is focused. I do not mean to disparage it. But it must not be confused with a reason for being in a classroom, for listening to a teacher, for taking

an examination, for doing homework, for putting up with school even if you are not [interested]. (Postman 1996, 4)

Although several factors (including the socio-political environment, students' family backgrounds, and institutional cultures and structures) all influence student engagement (Zyngier 2008, 1769; Stefani 2009, 4; Kahu 2013, 763), 'learner-centred teachers and teaching are vital to engaging learners' (Zepke 2011, 2). These findings align with those reported by many others that the single most important influence on student learning and engagement is the extent to which they perceive material to be 'relevant' (Hidi & Harackiewicz 2000; Hulleman *et al.* 2008, cited by Crumpton & Gregory 2011, 44; Entwistle *et al.* 2002, 10; Nardi & Steward 2003, cited by Hockings *et al.* 2008, 2, Sana-core 2008, 40; Thomas & Jamieson-Ball 2011, 24; Yorke & Longden 2008, 20).

This insight offers us the means to improve our students' engagement with our programmes. To take advantage of this opportunity, we must identify and reflect critically on the way in which we 'mentally picture' and therefore present both the nature and the purpose of our material.

While we have no control over the attitudes towards learning and the learning environment with which students arrive in our programmes, we can – and do – exert considerable influence over our students' perception of its relevance through the ways in which we present core knowledge and the bases on which we advocate its importance. By sending misleading or contradictory signals to students about the demands of the creative industries (for example, by claiming that our programmes endeavour to foster critical thinking skills – but then basing assessments on their ability to perform tasks), we may undermine our efforts to encourage our students to engage with their studies. To avoid sending such mixed messages – the detrimental impact of which on student engagement has been well documented (Draper 2003, 9) – academics and administrators must share a clearly understood common

purpose: what Entwistle (2003, 3) calls 'ways of thinking and practising in the subject':

[W]e are bound to take a view of the character of higher education, whether or not we articulate it and whether or not we are conscious of it. Consequently, even if we do not explicitly attempt to give an account – if only to ourselves – of what we take higher education to be, the views we hold will still be reflected in the ideas on quality that we form. In that case, the models and approaches that we develop for assessing and improving quality will take on the form of an ideology [that] contain hidden interests, bound up with our assumptions about the fundamental purposes of higher education. (Barnett, 1992, 15)

As demonstrated by Kuh *et al.* (2005, cited by Zepke 2011, 4), we can improve levels of engagement by assisting our students to 'see' how both the applications and the implications of our discipline's core knowledge relate, not only to their career goals, but to their lives. I believe that the learning objectives of art and design programmes provide an ideal opportunity to do this. There are four ways in which we can (and I believe, should) exploit these to improve student engagement:

1. By providing students with both the means and the incentive to consider carefully the influence and implications of 'meaning-full' narratives for their practice in art and design.

At the heart of contemporary art and design practice is the notion of compelling narratives: the 'stories' we tell about ideas, events, people, places and products. If we are adequately to prepare our graduates for the demands of the creative industries, art and design programmes must lead students to accept that, without the capacity to identify – and the inclination to reflect critically upon – how the narratives ('mental pictures') within commercial messages have influenced their perceptions, 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.

2. By providing students with the opportunity to explore their 'mental pictures' for learning, and the ways in which these influence their attitudes towards their studies.

By leading/encouraging our students to consider critically the relationship between the materials sponsored by special interest groups and the attitudes and behaviours these engender, we can provide them with the opportunity, the incentive and the means to consider how these have shaped their 'self-theories' (Yorke & Knight 2004) as well as their perceptions of the worlds around (and within) them. (Why do you want what you want – and why do you buy what you buy? And how have the beliefs and assumptions that animate your desires been influenced by art and design?) Accordingly, by leading our students to examine critically the current neoliberal narrative of higher education through the prism of contemporary art, design and communication practice, we will not only increase the demonstrable relevance of our material to their lives, but begin to counter the pernicious influence of the neoliberal dogma.

3. By providing students with both the opportunity and the requirement to explore the 'mental pictures' that inform the decisions they make in matters that affect their lives.

If, as explicitly endorsed by university mission statements, we are to enable our students to 'picture' themselves as more than just consumers, tax payers and aspiring professionals, but as human beings and as citizens, we must find a way to encourage them to consider critically the values and assumptions (the 'mental pictures') they carry around in their heads, because these will determine not only the lives they will lead – but the shape of the world they will leave behind.

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, 28e)

4. By allowing us to address and to challenge students' mental picture of the purpose of written assignments and assessments (Rutherford 2012).

Asking students to explain ideas in writing provides an accurate and effective way in which to identify (and assist students in recognising) important gaps in their knowledge and understanding (Rutherford 2012). Based on their prior experience, however, students often 'picture' the purpose of such written assessments as a means to judge or label them – with all the implications for fragile egos this entails. By leading our students to understand the correlation between the clarity with which one understands an idea and the clarity with which one can explain it ('If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough': Einstein, cited by Dunne 2010, a350), we can encourage them to 'see' written assignments as a way 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. Presented in this way, students can be encouraged to 'picture' all forms of assessment as an integral part of what we do to help them to learn.

Mental pictures and their professional/ industrial implications

The learning objectives of commercial art and design programmes reflect the knowledges, abilities and dispositions we know that graduates must possess – and be able to demonstrate – to pursue successful careers in the creative industries. Given the accelerating pace of technological and social change however, we cannot anticipate the nature of the 'problems' or challenges with which art and design practitioners of the future will be confronted. If our programmes are adequately to prepare graduates to meet the challenges and demands of the creative industries, our learning environment must be trans-disciplinary, enable students to extend their limits, and develop skills of inquiry (Ramsden n.d., 10).

Gone are the days in which training in the use of tools and technologies adequately prepare our graduates for successful employment because, by the time they graduate, the pace of social, economic and technological change will have rendered such expertise obsolete. Instead, our programmes must provide our students with the capacity to anticipate and meet as-yet unimaginable opportunities and challenges. Rather than presenting expertise with the current industrial tools and processes as an end in itself – or worse, confusing such expertise with education – we must lead our students to ‘see’ these tools and processes as opportunities to develop the critical thinking skills needed to make informed decisions in the application of such tools as will be developed in the future. In other words, we must ‘teach them how to fish’:

Work environments value performance [and so] professional education is meant to foster knowledge in order to prepare students to apply this knowledge to new situations. Eraut (1994) states that competence is associated with special intellectual capabilities or professional skills rather than practical skills. (Thilakarathne & Kvan 2006, 318–19)

Without both the ability and commitment to constantly extend and enhance their knowledge and understanding (Burke et. al. 2005, 134), graduates will be unable to recognise new challenges and opportunities, or devise appropriate solutions. Therefore, in our modules and assignments, art and design programmes must introduce, and lead our students to develop, the cognitive abilities and attitudes (dispositions) deemed essential by industry: the capacity and the inclination to recognise, understand, think critically about and express the meaning and implications of relevant information (Kay 2010; Sharp 2010; Thompson 2010).

Without the ability to *recognise* the meaning or implications of knowledge or information, our students will be unable to identify the bases upon which design/production decisions must be made. Without the ability to *understand* meaning and implications, they will be unable to

make informed decisions in planning the production of media products and materials; and without the ability to *express* meaning, they will be unable to convey this information appropriately to an audience. Finally, without the ability to *make* meaning, our students will be limited in their ability to make informed decisions – either in the interests of their social and professional communities, or in matters that affect their lives.

Recommendations based on the foregoing

To address the ideological implications of students’ mental pictures of higher education:

1. Ensure that our policies (the defined learning outcomes and assessment criteria) and our practices (both in the way in which we apply these as well as the focus of the feedback we provide on submissions) reflect those required by industry, rather than the short-term (and short-sighted) pursuit of irrelevant behaviours or outcomes.
2. Ensure that these goals and the strategies to achieve them are fully understood and actively endorsed by all who those in a position to influence their definition and application.

To address the pedagogical implications of students’ mental pictures of higher education:

3. Ensure that, in our explanations of both theory and practice (as well as our explanations of the assignments designed to foster our students’ understanding of the application of both), we exploit every opportunity to identify and explore the way(s) in which such ‘narratives’ have affected (and continue to affect) students’ perceptions of themselves as learners, as professionals, as consumers, as citizens and as individuals.
4. Ensure that, in our Induction sessions, we bring students’ attention to the relationship between the skills necessary for careers in the creative industries (the ability to recognise, understand and make meaning) and their approach to their studies – and to their lives.

5. Embed the use of critical writing assignments within all aspects of our programmes – including those modules whose focus is creative and visual design (see Rutherford 2012).

6. Encourage students to ‘re-imagine’ the purpose of such assessments, and how these contribute to their learning.

7. Establish closer relations between our institutions and their ‘feeder’ schools and colleges in order to provide prospective students with a much clearer understanding of the university learning environment, including what they should (and should not) expect so that, on arrival, their ‘mental picture’ of higher education might be more closely aligned with its demands.

To improve the professional/industrial prospects of graduates:

8. Resist the pressure to reduce the emphasis on knowledge and understanding (Collini 2012) in favour of the ability to complete tasks as the basis of assessment (Stevens 1999, 26).

9. Ensure that the emphasis of our programmes is on the ability to recognise, understand and make meaning as a way to foster both the ability and the inclination to think critically as a basis for decision-making.

10. Ensure that the contribution of industry representatives (as guest lectures) explicitly endorses the importance of these abilities to our students.

Conclusions

If we fail to improve levels of ‘meaning-full’ student engagement in our programmes, our students will not develop the skills and aptitudes necessary to become successful professionals, capable of making informed decisions in the pursuit of a fulfilling and self-directed career. Furthermore, they will not develop the skills and aptitudes necessary to become self-aware individuals, informed and engaged citizens, or capable lifelong learners, committed to constantly improving their capacity to make informed decisions in the pursuit of the above. If we fail to

improve student engagement in our programmes, the capacity of the creative industries (as well as the various sectors that rely upon their services) to continue to contribute to national/regional economic growth, employment and competitiveness will be severely undermined. If we fail to improve student engagement in our programmes, members of staff (as well, perhaps, as our departments and faculties) may find that they are surplus to requirements.

In our market-driven culture within which higher education is increasingly ‘seen as’ job training, most of our students come to us in order to learn the skills they will need to compete successfully for an exciting and well-paid career. While they may have no control over the ‘mental pictures’ they have inherited, I submit that we must treat them as, and thereby help them to become, sufficiently mature to accept the responsibility to examine the narratives by which they live and to consider the way(s) in which these have shaped their beliefs, assumptions and decisions. In addition to our responsibility to ensure the practical relevance of our programmes, I believe that we also have a duty to another, higher objective: to prepare our graduates for the challenges of shaping the world that you and I will not live to see.

As a teacher, and as a fellow human being, I can think of no greater gift to offer.

Note

1. This assertion is based on conversations with academics at several institutions who have attested privately to having come under pressure from their respective administrations to make such changes in their assessment of student work. For obvious reasons, such demands are not made in writing, and so no documentary evidence is available to be cited in support of this claim.

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