

A Degree in Advertising: an unwanted child of the business. Why academia and advertising should not be bridged.

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Context:

According to the directives bestowed on British Higher Education in the aftermath of the 1992 educational reform, employability, which became the responsibility of educational institutions, and employment, which stayed in hands of the employers, should overlap in the process of mutual imitation. Their common aim was to achieve better standards of life by exploring the potential of the mind and transferring it onto the ground of practical experience (Gibb, 2002; Cohen, 1993). Knowledge, and especially creative knowledge and communication, has become a political and economic target in the process of improving the level of wellbeing (Barnett, 2000). In this paper the employability potential of an advertising degree will be discussed within the British context and the heterogeneity of advertising as an academic discipline. In Great Britain the 'culture industries' started blooming during the introduction of the free market under Thatcherism and developed into the knowledge economy at the end of the twentieth century. As Peter Knight and Mantz Yorke point out, today it is the knowledge economy that has become the new machine of capitalistic success with education as its engine (2004, p.7). Design, advertising, journalism, computing, media and communication all carry a prime objective to change the landscape of the country into a creative nation of new opportunities. The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) define the objectives of Higher Education in Great Britain as follows:

Britain's higher education is a major contributor to the economic success and social well being of the country. Higher education is a national asset, whose excellence in teaching and research is world recognised. Better educated and more highly skilled people are more likely to be in work, earn more and contribute more productively to our economy and society (DIUS, 2007).

Employability-driven objectives for both teaching and research have geared universities towards new relationships with external stakeholders (Brennan, 2003; Cohen, 1993). Financial accountability and the self-budgeting of universities has become the measure of their market efficiency. Participants of academia, government and entrepreneurs have faced new tensions in their relationships, which unavoidably affect graduates and their employability (Bennett, Dunne and Carré, 2000). Whether the university is in need of a new vision for the future, defined quite often in terms of a postmodern or post-Fordist perspective (Giroux, 1992), and who would be responsible for the practical

realisation of that vision is an urgent question and one that requires a review of the roles traditionally imposed on the university (Cohen, 1993).

Methodology:

The argument below shows the complexities and anxieties within the academia-industry alliance from the perspective of one business: advertising, which has been widely introduced as an academic degree within the HE curricula after the UK's education reform of 1992. In the course of my research (funded by the British Academy ref SG-36752), which covered the period between October 2003 and June 2005, with an updated review in 2006 and 2007, two business institutions, twelve advertising agencies, three freelancers and twenty-two lecturers from higher education institutions were interviewed (while two replied in writing). All interviews were semi-structured with an accompanied list of questions (Oppenheim, 1992). The first set of questions was designed for college tutors, a second one was designed for practitioners, and a third was created as a survey with rank order scaling questions disseminated among practitioners who quite often did not have time for face-to-face interviews. The survey was also sent by post to ninety-eight advertising agencies, from which fifteen replies were completed and returned, and was used in five telephone conversations (Moser & Kalton, 1972; Singer & Presser, 1989). The business institutions interviewed were: the British Design & Art Direction (D&AD) and the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). For the purpose of this research, all names of the participants were anonymised, yet the definition of their positions was maintained for recognition of their professional expertise.

The results of this research have reflected a number of myths and misconceptions about advertising as a business and advertising as a subject. A lack of clarity regarding the origin of advertising within academic classification revokes the old problem of the divide between disciplines, and highlights the lack of interaction between theory and practice. Practitioners' distrust towards vocationally-orientated academic courses does correspond with the confusion of graduates regarding their employability status. A conflict between both sides has been identified and a high level of uncertainty, especially in regard to mutual responsibilities and forms of co-operation and communication has been revealed. For the purpose of this paper I want to concentrate on the two outcomes of my research: 1) the professional categorisation of defining advertising as a profession and 2) a position of advertising as a subject within the academic structure. I will observe how these two problems affect employability, and finally, I will discuss the relationship between employment development and employability practice.

Advertising as Practice:

Due to their individual attitude to work and continuous self-development, participants of new culture industries are defined by Richard Florida (2002) as

the “creative class”, whereas the jobs performed are described by Gina Neff, Elizabeth Wissinger and Sharon Zukin as “hot” or “cool” (2005). Neff et al. write:

contrasting with the key role played by workers in gritty manufacturing jobs in prior industrial eras, these entrepreneurial workers are mainly based in high-end service industries including media, entertainment, fashion, and, broadly speaking, culture; the supposedly glamorous spheres of the “symbolic economy” (2005, p.309).

Pierre Bourdieu calls those entrepreneurs “cultural intermediaries” (1984), emphasising their relational position across commercial forms of culture, and more significantly in the process of production and consumption. According to Sean Nixon (2003), however, we should separate the mythical role of “creatives” (as fashion leaders, taste setters, independent players) from their impact on economy. In reality the market is not able to accommodate all employees seeking opportunities within creative industries. According to the interviewed practitioners the golden prospects of an immediate career in advertising have now dimmed markedly. From the beginning of the 1990s a path to success has been transformed into an aggressively competitive employment race; a consequence of the oversupply of professional labour and free market economy. As was noticed by the interviewed practitioners, there were two main historico-economic currents at the end of the twentieth century that have coerced irrevocably the fertile landscape of the advertising world (Rabikowska, 2004):

1. The big accounts disappeared revealing losses; or, at best, shifted into marginal savings.
2. Technology disrupted the wholesomeness of advertising production and delivery leading to its reorganisation.

On the other hand, there were also opposite comments emphasising the unprecedented chances for the business, emerging from new technologies and the free market, which feed into a renaissance of advertising and its employability potential. This difference in judgement can be seen as problematic only if “one expects advertising history to follow a singular linear thread of progress” (Leiss et al. 2005, p.412). We cannot forget however, that advertising “is a highly conflicted and vastly diverse practice” which offers different opportunities depending “on interest and perspective” (*idem*). Besides, contemporary advertising makes up only a fraction of the overarching marketing strategy known as integrated marketing communication, which surpasses the borders between different stages of campaigns and requires understanding of the market as a whole. To understand the broad range of practices, it is necessary to identify a historico-economic context, and differentiate types of advertising as well as stages of an advertising campaign which communicate separate aims and consequently use various techniques. For example, the marketing stage will operate within the discourse of a rational strategy, whereas the media planning stage will adopt a discourse of reception and evaluation, and the overarching

creative stage will translate the above into a figurative expression. The traditional structure of an advertising agency validates such a division: an account and marketing department operate closely with management, the creative department situates itself in separation from others, while the media planning department and research need to communicate across all of them. There are also specialists involved in the process of advertising who are commissioned at different stages of a campaign, especially producers who have to hire other specialists: directors, photographers, production designers, and all different sorts of freelance workers. Altogether, they create a system which Steven, a freelance producer, has called a “food chain”, highlighting the mutual co-existence of all levels of the industrial hierarchy (Rabikowska, 2004). In business practice, all those areas and prolific expertise work together efficiently, although not always smoothly. This does not imply that they all have the same professional status, let alone homogeneity delineated by the one name, “advertising”.

Different skills and specialisations converge in the process of advertising practice, yet there is also a historical, diachronic dimension of advertising which link to contemporary politics and economy. Today we face a “horizontal labour market” characterised by flexibility and independence (Florida 2002, pp.102-105). American management theorists Michael Piore and Charles Sabel (1984) argued at the beginning of the 1980s that at the end of the twentieth century western industry will experience a radical transformation towards flexibility and narrowly specialised labour, which would change established economies. Gillian Ursell states that in the aftermath of this transformation, which we have been witnessing since the 1990s in the UK, freelance and casual staff, gathered in networks and self-directing groups, have been replacing staff in permanent positions whose responsibilities and expertises were clearly defined. During the end of the twentieth century practitioners have had to respond to the conditions of the new economy, compressing their professional tasks dramatically into small capsules of time and space (Harvey, 1990), where skills do not develop in one progressive direction, but rather undergo a disordered implosion into many sub-skills and temporary responsibilities (Bauman, 2000). Having been engulfed by such an eclectic professional environment, practitioners do not feel united under the umbrella of one occupation, which under Fordism was a guarantee of security and professional identity. In employability theory, *flexible specialisation* has threefold interpretation: inspired by the Frankfurt School, criticism of the situation of employees and their increased exploitation (Braverman, 1974; Atkinson, 1984, 1986; Ursell, 2006), the pro-managerial apotheosis of group networking and competitive re- skilling, (Piore and Sabel, 1984; Barnatt and Starkey, 1994;) and an approval, postmodern in character, of the free market which invites individualised input from practitioners who “play” with corporate structures (Sennett, 1998; Deuze, 2007). In each of these approaches, employability is regarded as a quality to be shaped or learnt, either because of economic necessity, or according to personal wish, but most of all in relevance to the historical and political conditions of the time which predetermine the nature of

professionalism. Correspondingly, advertising practitioners admitted that although they felt in control of their own career at some stages, they never overcome fears of redundancy or ineptness. Postmodern philosophy of work from the Left explains this situation in light of economic destabilisation of Western capital which causes the fluctuation of the market and unpredictability of professional specialisations (Sennet, 1998; Thrift, 1997; Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin, 2005). In “soft capitalism” (Thrift, 1997), driven by knowledge economy, employability is not paved with discrete grooves. Pursuing the right career recalls a trial and error method of guessing rather than strategic planning. Jacques Attali argues that this method is based on the “knowledge of the laws of the labyrinth,” (1996 cited in Bauman 2000, p.153) where the “ups” and “downs” in practitioners’ careers do not reflect any order, as jobs are changed regularly in a more horizontal manner - across different sectors and skills. This particular correlation between specialisation and generalisation of professional knowledge, being “in” and being “out” of industry, underpins all occupations today. Whether this strategy of “meandering” disables or empowers workers (“deskilling” and “enskillings” in Bromley and O’Malley, 1997) is not only an important socio-economic issue, but most of all an urgent political question to be dealt by the labour market.

Advertising and employability:

As has been argued in various studies on employability, the most flexible and hence increasingly ‘sellable’ skills in contemporary market are “soft” skills, like presentation, negotiation, teamwork, problem solving (Bridges, 1993; Usher, 1993; White, 1997; Beckett, 2000; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Sternberg, 2000) and this is especially required within culture industries (Birkhead, 1985; Rotzoll, 1985; McCall, 1987; Blanchard and Christ, 1993; Lancaster, Katz and Cho, 1990; Dickson & Sellmeyer, 1992; Dickson 2000; Ball, 2001; Ursell, 2006). In advertising, “soft skills” were often explained in a context of humanities and arts and general knowledge of politics and media. The strongest emphasis was put on the general “knowledge of things” and understanding of “human beings”, and this appreciation was notified across all departments in an advertising agency. In the same coherent manner practitioners of different specialisations agreed that what counts most in their profession are such skills as presentation, persuasion and negotiation.¹ Nevertheless, when asked about any specific examples of “perfect skills” during interviews, the practitioners did operate with vast definitions of being “updated”, “sensitive”, “passionate”, “intelligent”, “clever”, “independent”, “critical”. Even the management side of the advertising agency, which traditionally favours hard skills, like selling, budgeting or research methods, tended to prioritise soft skills before subject-specific expertise. Soft skills were seen as natural key-communicators which precede strategic learning, regarded as more mechanical and “less human”. The support for a “natural school” was stronger among creatives who favour a theory of inherent creativity and inborn

¹ These quantitative result were achieved by the use of sixteen scale rating questions, with a 1-10 scale, in which 1 was to signify no “relevance”.

creative talent which cannot be taught, unlike managers, media planners, researchers, and account handlers who believe in a scientifically organised progress of learning and developing professional skills. Nevertheless, both sides agreed that intelligence and “understanding of things and people” is a first condition of success in this job. This observation can be compared to the ability of acting appropriately in a particular place and in front of certain people argued by Sternberg (2000). A concept of “tacit knowledge” which can also be defined as “procedural intelligence” (ibid.) includes many non-verbalised abilities such as knowing how to behave, whom to approach and when, how to speak, how to react, how to fill in a certain role. Such abilities underpin an effective acquisition of both soft and hard skills, and would enhance their successful application in practice.

Becoming a professional through practice is the most appreciated career path in advertising. According to a freelance practitioner, “no one really knows what advertising is before getting on board” (Rabikowska, 2005). This observation articulates a commonly shared view that advertising must be learnt through practice and that practice cannot be taught at university. The interviewed practitioners represented a variety of disciplines including Photography, Film, Television, Literature, Design, Marketing and Anthropology, while some of them moved to advertising directly after A-levels, or even before, and developed their expertise starting from the basics². A so-called “advertising theory” which itself is conceived of many disciplines is either not appreciated by practitioners, or rejected on the grounds of its apparent irrelevance to *doing* the job. Most of those professionals did not study advertising at university level and they did not regard such an opportunity as conducive to developing a career. Only one of the interviewees had a BA degree in advertising and it was from the Arts College in New York. All informants had undergone internal training from more experienced colleagues according to the master-disciple system or they had learnt practice on pre-paid courses sponsored by the company. This has equipped them in the skills expected at the workplace and propelled their careers onto another stage. An analysis of individual CVs provided for this research by practitioners indicated that singular careers had been built on small steps undertaken at different periods and in various workplaces along a direction which could be seen as progressive. Although learning and working in this way suggests a hierarchal model, it is at the same time complimented by a horizontal type of professionalism. Advertising is an occupation which still applies some Fordist structures of employment within the post-Fordist landscape of the market. This double-edged approach has been observed within most culture and creative industries, especially within new media (Deuze, 2007). How does such a vertical-horizontal practice fit the postmodern approach to employment and employability? In the words of Gilles Deleuze, “postmodernity is repetition with a

² Perpetually, classical disciplines make an easy entry to advertising which still favours the prestigious status of Oxford and Cambridge graduates (see Leiss, Kline, Jhally and Botterill, 2005; Nixon 2003). As Nixon indicates in his research, around half of all senior agency personnel originate from elite universities (2003, p.62-63).

difference, a small variation” (Deleuze in Kensy, 2001,p.34). Within the advertising profession apprentice training, specialisation separation and hierarchisation is applied, whilst simultaneously we witness dispersion, independent freelancing and subdivision of skills. These different practices meet in the pool of “postmodern aura” (Newman 1985, p.5): the condition which signifies a simultaneous continuity with modernism and its immediate renunciation. According to Newman, the power of postmodernism lies in dissolving the old order. However, he also suggests that postmodernism has not been able to “marshall the centrifugal forces it has released” (ibid). Although a postmodern critique of employability puts skills and abilities under scrutiny in relation to the post-Fordist model, as Rainer Kensy and Seiichi Mitani (2001) argue, it should not be pondered in opposition to modernist critique, as they originate from completely incommensurable positions and they cannot be considered in parallel to each other. As unprecedented as the post-Fordist economy is, it still sees some of the ‘old’ models of work in practice, including centralisation, elitism, structurisation and permanency, but at the same time those models are pervaded and challenged by a new style of work. The postmodern approach does not explain employability and professionalism in utopian terms against a new market’s ontology, but instead it offers a heterotopic understanding of work, in which individual skills and abilities are acquired in between and across the different ontologies of different markets. Such an approach disavows however, the possibility of a synchronous adjustment between employability and employment, and undermines the idea of completeness between expert cultures participating in industry. To conclude this part of the argument, employability education and the development of the advertising industry do not need to complement each other or respond to each other in a direct manner. Their interdependence, in fact, implies a utopian vision of order, exchange and integration, such as that one as promoted in the picture of “bridging the gap” between industry and academia.

Advertising and Education:

On the side of advertising education available at the British Universities, there is a significant flexibility in the profile of undergraduate courses: a variety of teaching methodologies (from laboratory based to chalk and talk), different proportion of theory and practice, changing tutors’ qualifications, different character of teaching materials, and most of all different benchmarking do not contribute a coherent picture of advertising as an academic subject. Programme specifications do not suggest how many contact hours with practitioners the students should have during the whole course, what their role in the teaching and assessment process should be or what the expected proportion between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ would be and how it would be delivered.

Different branches of advertising are grouped under the three major disciplines: design, marketing and media. They are defined by the Quality and Assurance Agency for Higher Education as the benchmark statements ascribed

subsequently to 1) Art & Design; 2) General Business and Management; and 3) Communication, Media, Film and Cultural Studies. Although the QAA benchmarking permits flexibility and individual development of advertising programmes for each institution, it also reflects the disparity between the three major areas in the advertising business: marketing, creativity, and media planning. The separation of these programmes perpetuates a classical separation of sciences (marketing, media planning, research) and humanities (creativity, design). Nevertheless, as it has been mentioned above, cross-disciplinary practices within industry erode the borders between these compartmentalised sections. It is not unusual today to work in creative marketing, or even creative management or creative research. It has also been observed on the academic side that some degrees which are supposed to represent 'the business & management' benchmarking contain creative elements, whereas typically creative degrees extend their programmes to the marketing and management content. Under the media and even cultural studies there are advertising degrees which cover strategy and creativity in a very practical sense. Despite these internal differences all programmes try to respond to the employability policy for Higher Education in the UK, which defines educational objectives in pragmatic terms. This is particularly strict on mass communication degrees, such as advertising, public relations and journalism, as it is their task to serve the public and act as a liaison between society and clients (Carey, 1989; Rotzoll and Barban, 1984; Dickinson, 2000).

Regardless of these efforts, from the perspective of industry, academia is not qualified to teach advertising since it is formally detached from practice. This attitude has been well documented in British and American studies providing an insight into arguments between practitioners and academics (Casey, 1932; Crawford & Sabine, 1958; Roosenraad & Wares, 1983; De Mott, 1984; Budd, 1985; Altschull, 1990; Carter, 1995). According to practitioners only those experts who had experienced the complexity of the profession by doing it should be allowed to teach. Therefore academic lecturers are not prepared to teach advertising, unless they are one of the "hybrids": a type of practitioner who has converted from a successful business career into education or one such who is still working within both sectors at the same time. As stated in one of the interviews, "we had to learn *on our own* how to *do* advertising" (my emphasis). They have mainly learnt through their own mistakes and interim apprenticeships. For years they have been specialising in given professions, following the advertising of their masters rather than that of books, which Wally Olins (2003), a British guru in branding, accused of irrelevance and empty abstractness. Interestingly, practitioners themselves from a broadly recognised field of advertising become authors of textbooks recommended on most advertising courses and widely published by the most prestigious academic publishers, for example Wally Olins (2003); Sean Brierly (1995); Daniel Yadin (1998); Tom Brannan (1993); Mark Sherrington (2003); David Ogilvy (2000); Frank Jefkins (2000) and Michael Newman (2004). It is clear that business competes with educational institutions

in the same market, though operating with bigger investments and the prospects of immediate employment.

The strongest aspect of higher education, namely critical theory, is not appreciated by practitioners who prefer staying in the circle of practical knowledge. From the perspective of post-Fordist economy however, this is a one-sided view that the constantly developing market cannot sustain. As noticed by Jane Taylor in relation to journalism:

Practitioners now face rapid changes in knowledge, making it impossible for them to rely upon the skills and competences with which they qualified, updated only through practical experience. They need to function in a continuous learning environment (2002 , p.5).

Innovative and original thinking within advertising requires a departure from the area of the familiar and opening to new, even unrelated fields. The advertising industry needs to be enriched with criticism if it is to survive as a creative and responsive business. In order to keep inspiration for innovation in a constant stir advertising has to surpass the boundaries of subject classifications and also historical normativisation of theory and practice (see, for example, Ryle, 1949; Edel, 1973; Noddings and Shore, 1984; Eraut, 1985; Lipman, 1991; Dunne, 1993; Williams, 1994; Garrison, 1995). The aim of cooperation between both sides would be not abandoning such boundaries but rather changing them. Although academic courses are engaged with the purposes of employability in the UK, as Nicolas C. Burbules argues, “purposefulness can become counterproductive when, for the sake of achieving certain purposes, other educational opportunities are squandered” (1995, p.7). From the postmodern point of view, it is just the “gap” between Higher Education and industry which is the promising area, where the most puzzling and impossible questions are asked, and where uncertainty and contradictions provoke new solutions. The gap promises the impossibility of reciprocal response (response expected at the foundation level of all knowledge transfer projects) and instead offers a responsive inequality based on the *hic et nunc* engagement with the partner. Following this thesis, it can be concluded that bridging academia and industry is not necessary, and could even prohibit the reformulation of their identities. The exchange or knowledge transfer should take place within the ‘gap’ where satisfaction of each other’s needs is not possible and the relationship between them can never be fully solidified.

Conclusion:

The autonomy of advertising as both a profession and an academic subject is a symbolic concept which depends on historico-political circumstances that should be taken into consideration when employability is discussed. The entrance of advertising, a vocationally oriented subject, into the ‘ivory tower’ of academia can be seen as the evidence of changing educational politics. Practitioners need to

see the benefit of working with academics and students while the university needs to open to the reality of the market. Neither of them needs to bridge each other in a process of mutual imitation. A common benefit should originate from shared projects and reformulating traditional boundaries between them. A challenging exchange should affect both worlds even if it means tension and disagreement between them. Such a 'conflictual synergy' should not be seen as bridging the gap but rather as creating the gap, in other words, creating the space for assonance and difference which may lead in all likelihood to a new definition of both professionalism and education (Harvey, Locke and Morey, 2002). At this stage however, such co-operation is still difficult to achieve since the relationships between academia and industry are still confined in the paradigm of knowledge transfer based on the internal recognition of their needs and expectations expressed within their boundaries to the external partners. If advertising wants to be innovative and up-to-date with the surrounding changes, its knowledge production should be transferred beyond the site of application (industry) where the borders between disciplines are questioned. Finally, in opposition to the employability philosophy prescribed for Higher Education, this research shows that if academia wants to stay attractive to the business it has to provide the skills that cannot be attained through business practice alone.

References:

Abbreviations:

AHRC: The Arts and Humanities Research Council
COBE: The Centre for Outcomes-Based Education
D&AD: The British Design and Art Direction
DfES: Department for Education and Skills
DIUS: The Department for Innovation, Universities, and Skills
QAA: Quality and Assurance Agency
CAP: Committee of Advertising Practice
CIM: Chartered Institute of Marketing
ESRC: The Economic and Social Research Council
IDM: Institute of Direct Marketing
IPA: Institute of Practitioners in Advertising
ISBA: Incorporate Society of British Advertisers
HEFCE: Higher Education Funding Council for England
NAFHE: National Association of Further & Higher Education
RAE: Research Assessment Exercise
UCAS: Universities and Colleges Admission System

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Abbreviations:

AHRC: The Arts and Humanities Research Council

COBE: The Centre for Outcomes-Based Education

D&AD: The British Design and Art Direction

DfES: Department for Education and Skills

DIUS: The Department for Innovation, Universities, and Skills

QAA: Quality and Assurance Agency

CAP: Committee of Advertising Practice

CIM: Chartered Institute of Marketing

ESRC: The Economic and Social Research Council

IDM: Institute of Direct Marketing

IPA: Institute of Practitioners in Advertising

ISBA: Incorporate Society of British Advertisers

HEFCE: Higher Education Funding Council for England

NAFHE: National Association of Further & Higher Education

RAE: Research Assessment Exercise

UCAS: Universities and Colleges Admission System