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Mass Communication Education: A Plastic Rolex?

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SOME strain in the relationship between the media industries and the corresponding parts of universities is unavoidable. The journalism profession is suspicious of anyone who has left it. Meanwhile, from the outside, journalism is a superficially simple business. Its practitioners are professionally devoted to expressing complex ideas in an accessible way. There is no room for the specialized jargon in which the traditional learned professions cloak their activities. As a result large numbers of people regard themselves as qualified to comment on journalistic matters, and the profession often feels it is getting more advice than it needs.

Clearly the relationship is going to get very difficult if one side abandons all attempt at mutual understanding (McCall, 1992). The article cited is a forceful piece of writing, incorporating a surprising amount of emotional language. Readers are left in no doubt about what Professor McCall does not like— “the infamous Roper report”, “pandering to a professional audience which is impossible to please”, “education bashing from the professional industry”, “crass vocationalism”, “trade skills and vocational training”, “blatant careerism”, and so on. Readers had better have a taste for disputation if they are going to follow the course suggested.

Communication educators, says McCall, should be telling communication professionals three things. The first is that academics do know what the profession requires. The evidence offered for this one survey—is a bit thin, but this is what people want to hear anyway. Fine. The second is that knowing perfectly well what the profession requires, the academics have decided not to provide it. If a fight has not broken out at this point you can go on to the third observation, which is that there is no place in a university for that kind of education, which is “trade skills and vocational training”. Now let us tactfully overlook “trade skills”, because that is just a snobby put-down for vocational activities of which the user disapproves, and leave the question of “training” aside for the moment. Is it really true that vocational pursuits have no place in a university, that academe was a pristine virgin until she fell for this unsuitable gigolo called Journalism? Are modern universities still really run

on the “Brideshead Revisited” principle, that the function of higher education is to provide aristocrats with appropriate intellectual equipment for the enjoyment of their abundant leisure?

Let us turn to a typical catalogue from a respectable American university (UNCG, 1991). There are programs in chemistry and physics which one might suppose to be of interest to students who see their future as professional chemists or physicists. There is a whole school of business and economics. The Department of Accounting tells students that “graduates of the programme should be prepared to enter the accounting profession”. The Department of Finance offers two programs and assures entrants that “either program can lead to responsible managerial positions”. Then we have a School of Education, which we may infer has something to do with the training of teachers, and a School of Nursing from which, no doubt, emerge large numbers of people who expect to become nurses. No criticism is intended of the university concerned. The statements are typical. This article was written in an institution which offers degrees in social work, translation, and business. Other universities have schools of architecture which produce architects, medical schools which produce doctors and law schools which produce lawyers. Where theology survives, most of those pursuing it will become ministers of religion. In Britain, where many professions have their own qualifications administered by the profession itself, the university curriculum is often explicitly designed to meet the professional requirements as well as academic ones, so that the student collects a practitioner’s qualification at the same time as he gets his degree.

So we must suppose there is no objection to vocational objectives as such. The problem arises when degree courses, or components of them, are “narrow” or exhibit “crass vocationalism”. These are serious charges, but difficult to prove over a wide area. McCall makes no attempt to prove them. His case for change rests on two pillars: the first is “university politics and finances” and the second is “media studies in the liberal arts”.

The first of these begins with the undeniable truism that units teaching journalism are generally under-funded and under-staffed. The reason for this being that the activity is not regarded as particularly prestigious. There was a time when the pursuit of money and prestige was not regarded as a particularly good guide to curriculum planning, but no doubt it has to come in somewhere. The problem with this argument is that it is not as specific to communication studies as McCall supposes. John Kenneth Galbraith (1962) long ago pointed out that the tribal instinct flourishes among academics, and that in consequence there is a tendency to ascribe most prestige to those whose activity is least practical:

The prestige system of economics ... assigns, and for good reasons, the very lowest position to the man who deals with everyday policy. For this individual ... is immediately caught up in a variety of political and moral judgments. This puts him in communication with the world at large. As such, he is a threat to the sharp delineation which separates the tribal group from the rest of society and thus to the prestige system of the profession. Moreover, his achievements are rated not by his professional peers but by outsiders. This causes difficulty in fitting him into the professional hierarchy and argues strongly for leaving him at the bottom (p. 38).

This illuminates the root of the problem, which is not that journalism teachers are deficient in academic publication, a pardonable sin, but that they are not members of the tribe. This is probably unavoidable, because it is an important part of the journalistic ethos that the practitioner should be a member of no tribe other than his own. However hard they try (and some of us do not perhaps try very hard), journalists are instantly recognizable as non-members of the herd. The only complete solution is not to teach journalism at all.

And this is the solution which Professor McCall has arrived at. The second pillar of his argument is that there is a liberal art called media study, and this is the wave of the future. Now journalism has been put in a variety of categories. Bernard Levin (1979) once wondered whether it was “an art, a craft, a science, a confidence trick or a disease” (p. ix.). It cannot, however, be a liberal art because a liberal art is something pursued for its own sake. “Liberal” comes from the Latin word meaning “pertaining to a free man” (Onions, 1972, p. 1135), the relevant freedom in this case being from the need to earn a living. Journalism is studied so that the student, or others, may produce better journalism. McCall’s article on media studies as a liberal art is interesting and persuasive, but it is not about journalism. It is typical, in fact, of the obfuscatory clouds of ink squirted by disciplines which have doubts about whether they are still needed. When this writer was an undergraduate people were writing similar things about *Literae Humaniores*.

This brings us to the worm in the bud of the whole elegant argument, which is a basic terminological confusion. Readers will swiftly gather that McCall likes Media Studies, and does not like Journalism. What only becomes clear on closer examination is that he supposes them to be the same thing. The issue is not one of academic values; it is one of honesty. Students and employers know what a journalism degree is. It is a degree which prepares those who follow it for careers in journalism. One hopes it will avoid “crass careerism”, “narrow skills training” and similar evils, just as one cherishes similar hopes of degree courses in medicine and law. But in the last analysis the degree is a professional preparation (as well as other things, we hope) and cannot be designed in flat defiance of the profession’s needs and requirements. So “Mass communication belongs to the university” is elegant shorthand for the view that academics should be allowed to teach whatever they find congenial, regardless of the needs and preferences of their students or the profession which their students propose to join. What is not made clear is why the students and their future employers should put up with this. McCall has high hopes that the introduction of his “focus on message and aesthetic components” will still leave room for professional participation in “a variety of non-classroom avenues”. The media, it seems, will still be expected to provide internships for the products of this new system. Their other role is to “be more aware and receptive to the research and writing coming out of universities”. Newspapers and broadcast stations are expected to fish vigorously in the new pool of media-literate graduates being prepared for their delectation.

This seems unlikely. It is of course true that universities are entirely free to decide to offer courses designed for the needs of particular professions—or not to do so. What they cannot do is decide unilaterally on a particular approach which suits them, and expect employers to accept the results without further consideration. Employing the graduates of any particular program comes in the same category as consuming the effusions of the new highly doctorated media studies faculty: it is voluntary. Professionals will start reading the research and writing coming out of the universities when that material says something interesting to them. Similarly, they will recruit where they find recruits most suited to their needs. If the new “media studies” approach — whether labeled a journalism degree or not — produces graduates who are no better qualified than historians or English Literature majors, then employers will happily hire the latter. They will probably write better anyway.

Those of us who dwell in distant outposts on the other side of the Pacific owe a debt to McCall, because he has described properly the wave which has been lapping, in a rather confused way, at our office doors for some time. We may now understand why its arrival was accompanied by an odd smell. The basic idea is a deception. Media studies will be sold with a journalism label. If you peddled a watch in Hong Kong on this basis you would be committing a criminal offense. We are looking at the academic equivalent of the plastic Rolex.

Dress this up as you will, it is still an attempt to have cake and eat it simultaneously.

Owners of expensively acquired media studies doctorates want to have the huge enrollments attracted by journalism, without the inconvenience of teaching the subject, or of sharing their salt with the disreputable individuals who haunt the more technical parts of it. This paradoxical arrangement can only be sustained by deception. And even then not for long.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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