

Re-Enacted Affiliative Meanings and “Branding” in Open and Distance Education

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INTRODUCTION

Entwistle (1981) found it was possible and useful to categorize students in three categories: surface learners who want to acquire and use specific knowledge and skills, deep learners who seek a deeper coherent understanding of a field, and credential seekers who want a good diploma and will do whatever may be necessary to get it. The surface learners do not need formal distance education degree studies; they can more and more readily find just-in-time just-on-topic e-learning for a modest price. So the main clientele for distance education institutions are and will continue to be both those wanting a really deep meaningful education, and those who need really respectable credentials who also lack convenient affordable access to traditional universities. More and more it is becoming incumbent upon us to cater to the credential seekers and help to socialize them into their chosen fields, if possible converting them into people proud to be deep learners. Such socialization is not possible if all one provides is a cafeteria of online courses.

Much, if not most, higher education and especially distance education has concentrated on providing support for learning which (naturally) has mainly Rational Instrumental Meaning (RIM)—meaning useful for something else. Recent university distance education concentrated on providing just that knowledge and those skills that are most instrumentally useful for solving problems in the professions and for advancing careers. Well, what else is there? The answer is that there always has been life-world identity-centered learning that produces a deep understanding of who we are (e.g., a Cambridge woman, or an MIT man). Re-Enacted

Affiliative Symbolic Meaning (REASM) is central to our existence, but strangely deprecated today. Such meaning is mainly an end in itself, rather than being merely a means to something else. Much learning and teaching has REASM—or Re-Enacted Affiliative Symbolic Meaning. It is about who we are, rather than about what is what. It is about ways of being in the world, cultivation of renewed selves, and plausible hope through ongoing learning conversations. These distinctions are grounded in Habermas’ (1984) definitions of the “life-world” and the “instrumental world.” Historically, most traditional educational institutions and their practices have been as much as (or even more) about identity formation, about REASM, than about RIM. Moreover students have been very gratified to brand themselves with an Oxford accent or a Yale sweater. “Campusversities” do of course use “branding” (e.g., McGill sweaters, Concordia backpacks), but such things are often misemployed as merely marketing tactics.

A large part of what most students hope for is to take on some of the prestigious institutional identity of their university. Any community is partly a matter of symbolic identification. In the corporate world (Marcus, 2004), so-called “branding” is as much to help employees and customers have pride and a sense of enduring relationship with something large and important, as it is to increase sales. The older and most prestigious traditional universities have worked hard to provide the symbols and situations (boat races to basketball league games) which sustain affiliation. This kind of identification with virtual universities will also become more important to their survival, which will be more and more in competition with sundry commercial purveyors of just-in-time-just-on-topic (JIT-JOT) e-learning.

COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

The basic thesis here is that education is centrally about the selective propagation and improvement of both personal and cultural identity, and therefore our development work in distance education should consider how we support the various collective identities in which the learner grows her or his well-rooted individual identity. Good higher education is not just improving the knowledge and skills of individuals; it is also contributing to the education of the groups and networks to which they belong. We all have evolved over millennia to be identity-chunk addicts and identity pushers. By identity-chunks we mean those of our habitual ways of being, thinking, and doing which we would be as loathe to lose as an arm or a leg.

We are self-cloners and institution-cloners. Legitimate public education should enable us to switch personal and institutional identity-addictions to ones that promote ecological and cultural symbiotic viability (rather than self- and mutual destruction). Good education helps us choose and develop better (more loving and ecologically conserving) selves (i.e., identity-addictions), and helps us choose more loving ways of propagating identities indefinitely via others. Poor education merely makes a fetish of transmitting facts and skills without evaluating the probable life-world outcomes for communities of doing so. If we wish to improve the societal benefits of distance education, we must consider more deeply the communal aspects of meanings and value we teach. That is what technologically mediated higher education needs to recognize in order to helpfully contribute to the evolution of the wider communities of world society.

Perhaps one should note that in those past ages, when collective identities have been very exclusive and very rigidly maintained, being trapped in a single collective identity was often very debilitating for individuals (especially women) and was frequently a source of dreadful conflict in society. However, in our era, deeper identification with a school or university has become only one of many affiliations. More importantly since most universities now have very diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural student, staff, and faculty populations, stronger identification with such a university actually promotes multicultural collaboration.

BRANDING AND OTHER MORE SUBTLE AND PROFOUND FORMS OF REASM = RE-ENACTED AFFILIATIVE SYMBOLIC MEANING

Branding is nicely defined by Landor Inc. (<http://www.landor.com/branding/index.cfm>). Their authors define what is meant by *identity* and *identification with organizations* as follows: “The word ‘Identity’ describes the reality of an entity referring to all the characteristics, tangible or intangible, which stated very simply is what the entity is and what makes the entity unique” (Landor, 2004, opening pages). Identity helps one to answer questions such as who the firm is, who are its affiliates, and who are competitors—thus it is a concept that is highly relevant to the sense of belonging, and to socialization into communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

The (admittedly instrumental!) benefits of establishing a clear and positive institutional identity are: first for students, a clear and positive identity of their distance education university can reduce their sense of isolation, and help engage students in learning activities, so that the transfer of the deeper values of an academic program is facilitated. However, an identification with an institution can be of a very superficial kind or it can be an important part of one’s being.

A well-symbolized and well-experientially exemplified university identity helps students (and faculty) to establish their own desirable and desired roles in the society. For the distance education university itself, a clear and positively exhibited identity helps the university to build a distinct organizational image and a high reputation in its domain. This in turn contributes to the loyalty of students and alumni who accelerate the development of the university.

Some Examples of “Branding” and Affiliation Building Strategies in Practice Today

Our rough surveys indicate that most DE institutions are not deliberately doing much with rituals and symbols to propagate good ways of being in the world, as distinct from and beyond just teaching truthful facts and useful skills. The exceptions are

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