

Higher Education Mix (Four Bs of Higher Education Institutions): For Boštjan Žekš and, to a Lesser Extent, Followers of E. Jerome McCarthy

This text is about the most valuable assets in education: students and teachers. To some extent, it is also about policy makers. It focuses on different types of teachers in a similar way as some marketing gurus focus on four (or seven) Ps of the so-called marketing mix. The main aim of the text is to shed some light on the complexity of education and the importance of understanding as the most important final product of learning. This contribution is a far cry from a definitive picture of anything, let alone of the complex system of education. On the other hand, it aims at convincing the reader that learning (i.e., critically thinking about an issue) is the most effective cognitive enhancer, which increases our mental flexibility and provides strategies for solving problems.

Keywords: teachers, education systems, policy makers, students, rote learning, understanding

Mešanica visokšolskega izobraževanja (štirje B-ji visokošolskih institucij)

Nepoučenemu bralcu najprej končna opomba: naslov je izbran po analogiji štirih P-jev v marketingu. Nekateri strokovnjaki menijo, da štirje P-ji (*price, product, promotion, place*) niso dovolj za pravičen opis zapletenega spleta, zato so teoretsko podmeno razširili na sedem P-jev (poleg *process* in *physical evidence* so pomislili celo na *people*), drugim spet se na trenutke dozdeva, da tudi štirideset P-jev ni dovolj za poglobljeno analizo. Po drugi strani pa nekateri z vso zavzetostjo zagovarjajo misel, da je pravzaprav glavni krivec za zablode in površno psevdoteorijo črka P, ki raziskovalce sili v določeno smer razmišljanja, in da bi utegnili biti črka B (ali katera koli druga ali celo vse črke abecede) veliko primernejša. Kdo ima prav, seveda ni predmet tega prispevka, ki je posvečen Boštjanu Žekšu. Od 18. maja 2002, ko je v *Sobotni prilogi Dela* izšel zapis intervjuja s takratnim novim predsednikom slovenskega SAZU-ja z naslovom »Univerza, pomožna šola za reveže in mentalno ne popolnoma razvite«, do danes ne morem nehati razmišljati, kako zlahka nekatera pomembna besedila izginejo v pozabo in kako hitro popolnoma absurdne abotnosti postanejo predmet vsakodnevnih razprav.

Ključne besede: učitelji, študenti, izobraževalni sistemi, oblikovalci politik, učenje na pamet, razumevanje



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Let me start with a remark for the uneducated reader: The title deliberately resembles the analogy of four Ps in marketing mix. Some firmly believe that four Ps (*price, product, promotion,*

place) do not suffice for a thorough description of what they call marketing mix, so they widened their theoretical premise to seven Ps (in addition to *process* and *physical evidence* they also in-

roduced people). Others simply think that even forty Ps are too few for an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon. On the other hand, there are scientists who claim (yes, without providing evidence or proof) that the main culprit for delusions and superficial pseudo theory could be ascribed to letter P, which forces researchers into a certain way of thinking and that letter B could be a much better choice (or for that matter, and other letter or all letters of the alphabet). Who is right is not the topic of this text.

This modest piece of writing is devoted to Boštjan Žekš and E. Jerome McCarthy's followers. From May 18, 2002, when *Delo* published the interview with the then newly elected president of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts titled 'Univerza, pomožna šola za reveže in mentalno ne popolnoma razvite' (University, Special Needs School for the Poor and Mentally Underdeveloped), until this very moment I cannot stop thinking how easily certain important thoughts disappear into the abyss of forgetfulness and how easily meaningless discourse can flourish by being constantly regurgitated by teachers and students.

This text is about people, because I believe that in social sciences texts should be about people and not about abstractions that no one can make any sense of. I follow Billig (2009, 2013) who is clearly against noun-based style of writing i.e., reification, nominalization and passivization, because it only makes academic texts incomprehensible and difficult to grasp. This text is above all about people in education; not that they differ a lot from people in other professions, but they have a special role that is often left out in their job descriptions: in addition to inspiring, motivating and encouraging students they need to be aware of their intellectual responsibility and help students achieve the highest goal in life, which is to inquire and create and, last but not least, to internalize the parts that they found to be significant for their future personal and professional life. In this context, the purpose of education is to help students determine how to learn on their own. If we want to have a society of free, creative, independent individuals, educational systems should be geared towards encouraging active exploration, independence of thought and a willingness to challenge accepted beliefs. Everything else belongs either to pseudo-education or indoctrination. Many of the above thoughts have been internalised from the work of Noam Chomsky (2004).

This contribution is a far cry from a defini-

tive picture of (higher) education systems. Its main purpose is to shed some light on the most valuable asset in education, its people: students, teachers and policy makers.

Discussion

First B

Bees & Beacons. As any seasoned reader have already noticed, the first B is a double B. It represents the largest and the smallest groups of teachers, administrators and policy makers at all levels of education. Bees could be a source of inspiration, well organised as they are. On the other hand, they seem to be led by instinct and rarely question what they do. There are more than 20.000 bee species, some wild, others domesticated. They are critical for the societies around the globe, but often completely unaware of their important role.

Teachers sharing some of the characteristics of bees are satisfied with the status quo, do not question how things are done in education and are – in the same manner as honey bees – listed as endangered species, with some who in more favourable circumstances may have evolved into beacons unfortunately, are leaving the profession for good.

Beacons are rare, but of utmost importance: they help students at all levels of education to navigate on their path to understanding (understanding, not remembering and forgetting ad infinitum). When bees regurgitate the mantra of skills and knowledge, beacons are aware that only understanding counts. Beacons guide their students, try to retain their curiosity and open minds and are smart enough to question assumptions and paradigms and help students do the same. They are against rote learning and regurgitation, two of the biggest enemies of, let us call it this way, sustainable education. Sustainable education is quality education, not any education opportunity: it encourages critical and creative thinking, it goes beyond traditional borders of individual disciplines and sub-disciplines, it promotes research-based teaching/learning, it takes into account differences between students and constantly gives feedback, it challenges students and help develop their metacognitive skills. Beacons are rarely found among teachers; they are even more difficult to find among policy makers.

Second B

Bulldozers. Dozers create and destroy with equal insensitivity; they ruthlessly force their way like

a real bulldozer, hence they are often promoted to the policy-maker or headmaster status. Bulldozers come in several types: teacher-bulldozers usually stick to one and only one method of teaching (say, project-based learning). Lately, many of them have become keen proponents of e-Learning/e-Teaching, often mistakenly believing that quaranting and zooming equals online learning/teaching. Bulldozers in the policy-maker sector of the education industry would, among many other things, force others to believe that testing is good for students even in situations where there has been little or no feedback given. Bulldozers are often too powerful and use their brute power to force their opinion on bees and students. Sometimes their speciality is reaching false consensus on the premise of false conclusions being previously made.

Third B

Bullshitters. We live in the world in which, it seems at least occasionally, bullshit reigns supreme. 'One of the most salient features of our culture,' writes Harry G. Frankfurt (2009), 'is that there is so much bullshit.' We are all aware of it and we all contribute our share to it, but because we take the situation for granted, very little work has been done on the subject. According to Frankfurt speech emptied of all informative content 'is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what they are talking about.'

Frankfurt determines that bullshit is speech intended to persuade without regard for truth.

It is difficult to say with any certainty supported by sound statistical data that the number of bullshitters increases exponentially with the level and field of education. Some may believe that these numbers are considerably higher in social sciences and higher levels of education. Geographically speaking, Finland may lag behind in this respect, which, of course, is good for all stakeholders and the society at large. Unfortunately, there are many countries where a person who is not good at anything is more than welcome to become a teacher. The discussion about the consequences of this fatal mistake is beyond the scope of this article.

Bullshitters like to listen to their own voice and are unable to answer the question: 'What do you mean by this?' This group of teachers is unable to learn, lacks intellectual humility, their expertise is worthless, are overconfident, and represent a bigger threat to the development of

education systems than liars. Listening is not their speciality, nonsensical speech their piece of cake. They are Deepak Chopras of many educational systems. Empty discourse pretending to bear meaning is all they are capable of – to the detriment of all others involved.

Fourth B

Barbarians. This is a miscellaneous group of teachers, ranging from cool teachers (in the eye of the short-sighted student) to clueless teachers and many types in between (lazy, on the verge of retiring, utterly strict, too friendly, sick and tired of the job, text-book dependent, early career teacher, etc.). Their common denominator is that they are unable to play this important role in the society, because they do not fit in the society of learners. Teachers in this subset, miseducate students, seeing teaching as passive awareness of some dead facts. Oversimplification, on the other hand, is the speciality of policy makers belonging to this group.

Bulldozers, bullshitters, and barbarians belong to traditional education: they teach by the book, and they teach to the test. They are focused on propositional knowledge, not on skills and understanding. They encourage sadistic teaching methods by sticking to the principle of assembly line in the presentation of topics that – as a rule – overlook the needs and interests of students, hinder their creativity and inhibit any change.

Conclusion

I was probably wrong in 2017 (Rižnar 2017) when I wrote that this was a make-or-break-it moment for higher education institutions. At that time, I did not know that COVID-19 crisis would bring about so much nonsense claims into the education system that Dunning and Kruger would be turning in their graves had they not been alive. Yet I was probably not wrong that we need a creative destruction in education at all levels and that we should embrace learning (and not pseudo-research and publishing) in education as a fundamental mission of universities. By following Kahneman (2013) we need to focus more on teaching disciplined thinking, decision-making skills, principles of probability, choice theory and statistics and learn how to approach problems methodically and avoid jumping to conclusions.

Learning is the most effective cognitive enhancer, which increases our mental flexibility and provides strategies for problem solving and abstract thinking. Using big words (learning out-

comes, reference points, closing the quality circle) in education, dressing banalities up as profundities will only lead to serious rhetorical sickness, in education and in society as a whole. As teachers who value truth, we should not suffer the pseudo-profound gladly and should do our best to help our students develop, as Cohen (2002) puts it, a better 'crap detector.' Education is about asking questions, validating answers, assessing meaning and, last but not least, having a keen sense of the ridiculous, all this done with cautiousness and humility.

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