

Postgraduate study and the path to mastery

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This is a speech to prospective students in Master-level programs offered by the Australian Graduate School of Entrepreneurship in Swinburne University's Faculty of Business and Enterprise, 20 August 2008

I was asked to speak to you this evening as a graduate of the Master of Science (now the Master of Management) in Strategic Foresight. In contemplating what I would talk about with you, I realised how difficult it would be to separate this particular identity from a second one that's equally relevant to tonight's context. The second identity that I have in mind here arises from my role as an educator, working with students in a graduate course in sustainability here at Swinburne. As a graduate of a Master-level program and as a graduate *educator*, I'm deeply interested in both the nature of *learning* itself and in what we mean by *mastery*. I'll draw on these interests now in exploring with you what I understand to be the value of Master-level study at Swinburne.

Earlier this week, an opinion piece by Ben Saul titled 'Why academic freedom must be preserved' appeared in *The Age* newspaper. In support of the idea that students cannot expect *not* to be challenged by their lecturers, Saul drew on a quote from Edward Said's 1993 Reith Lecture in which Said expressed the view that "Least of all should an intellectual be there to make his or her audiences feel good: the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant."

While I strongly support Said's initial premise, the conclusion he draws from it is, to my mind, neither a necessary one nor a healthy one, particularly in *Saul's* context where the intellectual is also a facilitator of learning. With this in mind, I would like to engage you in a small thought experiment that has its origin in similar conceptual territory to Said's premise, but draws on an entirely different educational ethic to the one implied by his conclusion.

The educational ethic for this thought experiment is based on the work of Robert Kegan, Professor of Adult Learning and Professional Development at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. Kegan recognises that graduate education worthy of the effort that developing practitioners invest in it is not simply a matter of filling a vessel with information. Rather, it is about transforming the very structure and shape of the vessel itself, in order to allow us to make sense of information in entirely new ways. Kegan's understanding of the reshaping process could not be more different from that expressed in Said's conclusion. For Kegan, this requires that we create an environment of support and challenge that respects people's existing ways of making sense of the world as inherently meaningful and hence legitimate to them.

The thought experiment will involve my reading to you in a moment a passage adapted from Kegan's book *In Over Our Heads*. The passage is based on a speech that he has given regularly to the graduating class at the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology, in which he lists a series of good reasons for students to reconsider their plan to graduate from the course, and hence to remain students forever. I suspect that the remarks have much relevance for those contemplating not graduating at this stage, but rather embarking on a further period of studentship.

Your role in the thought experiment is straight forward: I'd like you to listen to these remarks, while imagining for the moment that you are hearing these at your own graduation after completing the Master level of your own course. As you listen, I invite you to also consider a personal research question based on the experience of listening to the remarks as a graduating student. This question is: "If I had heard this prior to embarking on my studies, how might my engagement in Master level study have been different?"

The thought experiment begins now:

"So long as your program was not complete you could always quell your feelings of being inadequately prepared with the comforting thought that you have more time to learn these things before you graduate. The message behind the comforting thought was that graduate education is an enormously long undertaking, but at least when you have completed it, if you were conscientious and well-disciplined, you will be a completely trained, completely educated practitioner in your field. Well, now here you are, about to conclude a long period of study and training in which you certainly have been reasonably conscientious and reasonably well disciplined. And you know as well as I do that you may not exactly feel like a completely trained, completely prepared practitioner. You know that you still don't know anything much about *this*, or really how to do *that*. And you thought you would. So I have a solution: Don't graduate!

If you let yourself finish and graduate, you are surrendering forever the refuges of provisionalness, of apprenticeship, of being embarked on an easily explained journey to a respectable destination. You will have to stop journeying and arrive. You will have to be not just training to be a practitioner, but the practitioner him or herself; not just promising, but someone who delivers. All the perfectly good reasons not to be a grown-up, a status that graduate education has been an ingeniously acceptable way of forestalling, will now reappear more clearly than ever. Who wants the responsibility? For that matter, who wants to leave behind one's parents, neither of whom perhaps was a professional? one's social class? one's siblings? one's spouse? There is one good solution to all this: Don't do it! Stay in the program!

In order to graduate you're going to have to say your thesis is complete. Saying your thesis is complete means that you must now face the inevitable gap between the thesis you imagined you would write and the one you really wrote, between the thesis you hoped to write and thought you would really write when you proposed it, and the thesis you in fact did write. Every limitation you've spotted up to now that you told yourself would be gone or fixed before it was done must now be faced for what it is, a limitation that will *not* be fixed or gone. But then that's only if it is done. If you don't graduate, your thesis never has to be done.

If you really let yourself finish the program you are going to have to deal with the fact that your marriage, your relationship with your children, your sex life, or your backhand—all those things whose disrepair you have been attributing to the stresses of being back in school—may actually *not* get any better now that school is over..."¹

¹ Kegan, Robert 1994, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, pp. 299-300.

This concludes the remarks, and the thought experiment.

So how might you make sense of these remarks that I have just recounted? You might interpret them quite literally as a recommendation to not bother with further formal education. This, however, would be a very limited interpretation. My intention here is certainly not to prepare the way for you to conclude that further education would be a waste of time.

A more valuable way to interpret these remarks is as a call to reconsider your relationship with the process of education itself. If these remarks have created the disturbance that I'm hoping for, you might shift slightly the way that you make sense of the idea of education itself. You might come to see education less as a means of determining how you will make decisions and take action, and more as a means of disturbing the very ideas through which you know yourself as a decision maker and actor.

In Kegan's remarks, for the graduating student, leaving formal study means leaving behind any pre-conceptions that we can predict from the outset how engaging in a course of study will change us. So how might Kegan's remarks, intended for students who have just *completed* the level of study that you are now considering *commencing*, be of assistance to you?

To appreciate this, it's my contention that we need to shift from a view of studentship based on receiving and being imprinted with transmitted ideas, towards a view of studentship based on the principles of self-organisation. In this view, education is poles apart from the notion of recreating students in the eyes of the university, the faculty, the teaching staff or our encompassing cultures. My friend and colleague Frank Fisher, with whom I teach in the graduate course in sustainability, has a way of expressing the self-organisational view of education to new students that I find particularly simple yet powerful: we are not interested in making students more predictable to us through their engagement in our course—we would like our students to be *less* predictable to us when they leave. We would like to be surprised by the insights and actions that they create. We would consider our work a success if, as Kegan also suggests, students on completion of their studies with us were to hold themselves to *their own* standards, rather than holding themselves to *our* standards.

Within the view of learning that I have described here, mastery takes on a very different character to the traditional view in which becoming a master means acquiring particular competencies. In this alternative view, the master, rather than developing greater *certainty* through the process of learning, develops instead greater capacity to thrive in the midst of *uncertainty* and to live with ambiguity in the course of responding to the organisational management and leadership challenges that she or he encounters.

This is the great opportunity that awaits you in the development of genuine mastery of your field. In my experience, both as a graduate student and a graduate educator, an environment that provides the appropriate balance of support and challenge is key to the development of such mastery. While I can personally speak only for the Strategic Foresight Program, I can say quite genuinely that such an environment was made available to my classmates and me at Swinburne.