Beyond Utilitarianism: A New Paradigm for Orientation Professionals

Bryce Bunting

"So, what is it you do?" If you are at all like me, this is a question with which you have a love-hate relationship. One part of you—the passionate, first-year student advocate part of you—is ready with an articulate and theory-based response that would make your graduate committee chair proud; however, the other part of you knows that most people who ask this question are not ready for or interested in that response—they are just making polite conversation. So, you shift to autopilot and give the much simpler and watered down version: "I run new student orientation at State U." Although this is usually enough to satisfy the low levels of curiosity which prompted the question, occasionally this pre-packaged answer elicits a blank stare requiring a slightly more in-depth follow-up, which almost always includes terms like "plan," "manage," "organize," "direct," or "events."

To be fair, there is nothing inherently wrong with these simple responses; however, the reflexive choice of words we gravitate to in these situations (i.e., plan, direct, coordinate) suggests an often hidden (or, at best, unexamined) paradigm that influences our work in imperceptible and, as I will argue here, potentially problematic ways. The particular conceptualization of orientation work underlying these simple explanations is what I term the *utilitarian paradigm*, in that it approaches orientation programming as, largely, an exercise in pragmatics. When operating from this model, we concern ourselves with the nuts and bolts of orientation—course registration, tours, and evening social events, to name a few. Ultimately, our fundamental objective is to pull off an event which is well-organized, informative, fun, and, above all else, practical.

At this point, it seems necessary to respond directly to a natural question that you have likely asked: What is wrong with an orientation that is pragmatic, entertaining, instructive, and well-orchestrated? Absolutely nothing. In fact, few of us would keep our jobs if we had no concern for whether students had classes on their schedule, could find the library, or formed new friendships during their first few days on campus; however, this narrow focus on isolated components of orientation (i.e., events), as well as other superficial features that often vie for our attention (e.g., meals, venues, and t-shirts), prevents a more holistic approach emphasizing the *aesthetics* of a comprehensive orientation *experience*.

The *utilitarian paradigm*, though quite helpful from an entertainment and

Bryce Bunting (bryce_bunting@byu.edu) is the Program Administrator for Freshman Mentoring in the College of Undergraduate Education at Brigham Young University.

event management standpoint, often results in a fragmented orientation program experienced by students as a grueling marathon of disjointed events. If we could listen to the internal monologue of one of these students as they recount their orientation itinerary, it might sound something like this: "I went to a long meeting in a big room where the president spoke; then we were led on a long hike around campus in the summer heat with no water, while the orientation leader pointed to a lot of buildings that I don't remember; then I finally got to register for my classes. Oh yeah, we also had a dance party that night, which was kind of fun, but the music was lame." This fictional student has been to a variety of events, all with some intrinsic value; however, the failure comes in that he or she has walked away without having made any new meaning, reflected on key messages, or resolved to do anything differently during his or her college experience as a result of having attended orientation. Consequently, an important developmental window—a student's first few days on campus—has closed, and a tremendous opportunity to shape and influence his or her experience has been lost.

In contrast to an exclusive focus on the utility of orientation, an alternative approach is described by what I will call the *aesthetic design paradigm*. Through this lens, orientation work is viewed as a process of *designing an aesthetic experience* for students—that is to say a collection of interwoven experiences which are coherent, connected, and infused with meaning (Parrish, 2009). Typically, aesthetics are associated with art and perceptions of beauty; however, aesthetics can also describe experiences which are immersive, complete, and transformative. In contrast, experiences lacking this aesthetic component are routine, dispersed, disengaging, and fragmented (Dewey, 1934, 1989).

While attending to the holistic qualities of orientation, the *aesthetic design paradigm* also positions practitioners to see orientation not merely as a series of events for students to attend as passive observers, but as a learning experience which invites students' active engagement. From this perspective, we can view ourselves, not as event managers or entertainers, but as designers of learning experiences that are crucial in framing and launching students' subsequent undergraduate experience. It follows, then, that principles of effective teaching and learning should guide the conceptualizing, planning, implementation, and evaluation of the type of orientation experience I am describing. A comprehensive review of effective pedagogical principles that might be brought to bear on the design of orientation is far beyond the scope of this essay, but there are some basic "first principles" of the aesthetic design paradigm from where we might begin. The term "first principles" is used to suggest that the principles are so general and flexible that they can readily be adapted and applied in virtually any type of orientation program and any institutional context (Merrill, 2002). They have been drawn from the field of instructional design and flow from an assumption that we experience learning as a narrative journey (i.e., with elements of plot, character, theme, and context) (Parrish, 2009). I offer them here as a starting point for a more expansive dialogue exploring the ways in which pedagogical aesthetics might guide the work of orientation professionals.

- Learning experiences have plots, with beginnings, middles, and endings. Just like a film or story begins by instilling tension, moves forward with the introduction of new problems, and concludes with some kind of resolution, orientation could be built around a similar narrative framework. Attending to this narrative arc not only contributes to the aesthetics of orientation, it also facilitates meaning-making and deeper learning for students (Bruner, 1990).
- Learners are active agents (characters) in shaping their own learning experience. Often, orientation is approached as a "one-size-fits-all" endeavor where each student participates in the same activities in the very same sequence. Orientation could be designed, however, to allow students to make limited, but meaningful choices as to what they learn and how they learn it.
- Learning experiences are enhanced when they are linked by an underlying theme, one which gives meaning and context to subject matter and activity. An effective theme not only ties together the various events and processes of orientation, it provides a summary of the overarching philosophical purposes of the overall experience. As an example, a theme might be represented as some kind of generative goal that directs and gives purpose to students' participation (e.g., a problem to be solved or task to be completed).
- Context (setting) contributes to the cohesiveness and authenticity of the learning experience. The setting for orientation should contribute to the cohesiveness of the experience by reinforcing its theme and goals. These features might include language and tone, the visual images displayed around campus, and the physical layout of meeting and activity spaces. For example, even subtle shifts in the language used in referring to students (e.g., "budding scholars" rather than "new students") can be used strategically to frame the learning experience.
- Faculty, staff, and orientation leaders are supporting characters and model protagonists in learning experiences. Campus personnel do much more than orchestrate and lead orientation; they are key characters in the experience that model effective learning, reinforce the theme of orientation, and invite students to engage as active learners.

Consideration of these and other principles will move the field toward a refined view of orientation, in which our work is seen as a process of applying sound pedagogical principles to artfully weave together a cohesive experience or narrative, one which is meaningful, memorable, and transformative. Imagine, for example, how different orientation might be if the Convocation speaker, like a skilled writer or producer, introduced an element of intrigue or conflict during her initial remarks and invited students to seek resolution during their subsequent orientation experience. Orientation leaders could then support students in approaching their participation in orientation as a quest to discover answers, develop solutions or strategies, or even ask new questions. Then, as a conclusion to this narrative, students could be brought together in small groups to reflect on and

share their learning around this theme. Students could still go on a campus tour, register for classes, and meet other new students; however, these once disconnected and unrelated experiences could take on new meaning and purpose.

None of this is to say that the two metaphors discussed in this essay are mutually exclusive—indeed, orientation can and must be both aesthetic and pragmatic; however, far too often, we focus exclusively on planning and managing, thereby losing an opportunity to *design* an experience that, like a good piece of art, stimulates reflection and promotes personal transformation and action.

References

Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dewey, J. (1934/1989). *Art as Experience* (Vol. 10). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Merrill, M. D. (2002). First principles of instruction. *Educational Technology Research & Development, 50*(3), 43 – 59.

Parrish, P. E. (2009). Aesthetic principles for instructional design. *Education Technology Research & Development*, 57, 511 – 528.