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Calvert, Dave

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Original Citation

Calvert, Dave (2015) MASHED and SHAMED: a new approach to the acronym. In: When the writing is on the wall: a discussion of the ecology of research, creativity, impact and value, 9th May 2015, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. (Unpublished)

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**MASHED and SHAMED: a new approach to the acronym
A semi-playful provocation**

**TaPRA AST working group
Interim event – Royal Central School of Speech and Drama**

9th May 2015

I have described this provocation as 'semi-playful' because while I am ostensibly arguing for a rethinking of how acronyms function in policy-based discourse, this is not an entirely serious proposal, surprising as that may seem. Underwriting this proposal, however, is the more serious observation that playfulness itself is an essential but subordinated element of such discourse, enjoyed as a means to an end but rarely, if ever, employed as an end in itself because it is never entirely sure where, when, or whether it is actually going to end. And this freewheeling playfulness causes anxiety in policy-based discourse which is itself underwritten by corporate principles, such as productivity, efficiency, functionality, simplicity and resolution.

The acronym appears as the perfect discursive product under these principles since it claims to bring together comprehensive information in a single, pocket-sized mnemonic. Take STEM, the acronym for educational priorities, which claims neatly to contain the essential areas for a rounded, productive education: science, technology, engineering and maths. What could be simpler or more efficient than this single four letter word? It is functional in that it is easy to remember, but also in its persuasiveness that these are, indeed, the requisite priorities of education. That persuasiveness, its promotional function, is not a consequence of any rational exposition which lies beyond the power of the acronym. Rather, it is a matter of artistic form: the educational priorities assemble themselves into the evocative word 'stem', producing a feeling of complex ideas resolved in a perfect synthesis. It is the

power and appeal of this resolution that somehow convinces us of the validity of these principles.

The Warwick Commission's recent challenge to STEM exposes this operation by offering an equally potent acronym that adds the arts to educational priorities: STEAM. While the Commission's report clearly lays out the rationale for this agreement, and I'm sure we would all accept and approve the argument, I propose that the force of this challenge lies as much in its artistic playfulness as in any argument for the inclusion of the arts. This playfulness is, I propose, part and parcel of the structure of the acronym in the relationship between the mnemonic word and the various components that constitute it, between its form and content. That mystical, persuasive power which bypasses rational argument is a consequence of a sensed or imagined reciprocity between form and content, and the stronger the sense of this mutual reinforcement the more persuasive the acronym. The wordplay involved in constructing this relationship fosters a sense of playful pleasure that guides both the production and reception of acronyms. Imagine the proposed new acronym to replace STEM was not STEAM but MEATS. The efficiency, productivity, simplicity and functionality remain the same in every case, but the sense of resolution somehow feels weaker. STEM remains the more powerful option. This draws attention to a non-corporate, often overlooked but nonetheless valuable, dimension of the acronym which is its poetic aspect.

This poetic aspect is, perhaps, not foregrounded in the transmission of acronyms because, while it facilitates the necessary sense of resolution, its playfulness works against the other corporate principles through its ambivalence and polysemic qualities. It complicates simplicity, derails functionality, loosens efficiency and is rampantly uncontrolled in its over-productivity. STEM, in this poetic aspect, is

appealing and effects resolution through its associations with nature, flowering, life, sturdiness, a Dylan-Thomasesque evocation of the force that through the green fuse drives the flower. This sense of unstoppable springtime blossoming underscores the educational values presumed in the acronym. But it also contains its own opposite definition, the verb over the noun: 'to stop, check; to dam up (a stream or the like)', evoking a sense of impeding the flow of educational development. The acronym must suppress its own playfulness to expunge such troubling association.

STEAM similarly provokes an enthusiastic response through its associations with power, released frustration, the harnessing and channelling of nature in innovative and productive ways – all of which appeal to artists and humanists who have been excluded from the promotion of STEM subjects. And yet, it also opens itself to its opposite: it evokes the inventions of the Industrial Revolution and so counter-intuitively promotes the scientific, the engineered, the technological and the mathematical over the artistic. While reinventing education for a twenty-first century generation, the poetic sparks of STEAM also conjure up a historical return to Victorian values.

These complexities and ambivalences are not, in my view, problematic but should be pursued as they alert us to ongoing reflection rather than the persuasiveness of resolution. In what ways do the sciences dam, rather than drive, the flow of knowledge? How far is our understanding of the arts and humanities indebted to Victoriana? The acronym can be a gateway to these reflections, and so I want to propose two alternatives to STEAM that foreground the acronym as a playfully problematic rather than resolute mechanism.

Before doing so, a caveat that the playfulness can also be devilish. STEAM, as noted is the most appealing of its anagrammatic alternatives, and so has immediate

power. But what about the Humanities, which are still excluded? So my first task was to rectify this by adding the H. Having done so, I struggled to come up with a poetically playful acronym, with the exception of THAMES, which instantly took me to the dirty old river of Waterloo Sunset which must keep flowing and cannot be stemmed. But in an era of devolution, it also took me to a London-centric approach to education, and so I decided to steer away from it.

So, my next bit of play was to change the priorities – and I'll admit that I did this on the flimsiest of reasons but then I'm valuing play over efficiency. So, in response to the historical associations of STEAM, I decided to ditch Technology and replace it with its more contemporary equivalent Digital. Aren't other forms of Technology already covered by Engineering anyway? So that shift expands my poetic options, and these are my new ideas for acronyms.

MASHED: I'm calling this the anti-acronym because its poetic aspect undermines a key tactic of the corporate acronym, which is the neat compartmentalisation of its contents, efficiently separating Maths from Arts, Arts from Science and so on.

MASHED, instead, poetically frames the content within an educational approach in which these subjects are not so readily compartmentalised but overlap, inform, flavour, collapse into each other in a buttery, stodgy, comforting and nourishing mass. For exponents of Drama-in-Education, this isn't exactly radical, and it is an approach that Finland I believe is currently moving towards. Could the power of the acronym be harnessed in this way to drive a rethinking of the ethos, rather than priorities, of education?

But my preferred acronym, is SHAMED, which I'm calling the dialectical acronym.

This runs counter to the corporate acronym in that its poetic aspect brings back into play what is shameful, what seeks to be hidden and forgotten rather than promoted

and celebrated. As such, it opens up the complexities of the content in a way that demands a more critical, dialectical engagement. In breaking down the mnemonic word into its constituent parts, I advocate a shadowy second layer which I call the Reflective side of the more usual, primary layer, which I'm calling the Objective.

SHAMED	
Objective	Reflective
Science	Surveillance
Humanities	Hiroshima
Arts	Apartheid
Maths	MPs expenses
Engineering	Eugenics
Digital	Dialectic

So, to place this in a table, we have here the conventional educational subjects that make up the acronym SHAMED. In the Reflective column, we place corollaries to those subjects which propose their ethical complexity to us. In keeping with the spirit of MASHED, these won't correspond to their Objective equivalent. So in the Reflective, Digital might be confronted with its own responsibility for Surveillance and Engineering might have to negotiate Hiroshima, while the promotion of Humanities gets balanced against its own failings in the longevity of Apartheid. Maths may be one of those school subjects that no-one quite sees the daily relevance of, but it certainly came in handy for MPs fiddling their expenses. And how does progressive Science negotiate its own culpability for Eugenics? That leaves the Arts – and I have to admit, I struggled here. Even looking within my own research areas, the deeply problematic field of blackface minstrelsy, universally denounced for its inescapable racism, has recently been complicated by Marxist analyses that recognise its class-based significance, which extends to fomenting layers of integration between

immigrant-Americans, including African-Americans. So I'm going to propose that the Arts stands for the Dialectic itself, bringing together the contradictory in ways that befuddle easy resolution.

This Dialectic point means that this acronym can never be resolved, must remain perpetually open to playfulness and so brings the artistic, poetic aspect of the acronym inescapably into the centre of the discourse. This, in effect, is my provocation: as researchers and artists, we should not just question the contents of debate, but should also trouble its forms; and if we are going to renegotiate agendas built on compartmentalised priorities, measurements of impact or a quantitative sense of value, we must keep the inherent sense of playfulness open and alive by refusing to allow these agendas to settle into an easy resolution.