

# Plato, Socrates, Hunt, and Rotfeld: Eigenforms of Academic Collaboration

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## ABSTRACT

A number of academic institutions profess to offer Interdisciplinary Studies but few truly achieve it, and not without a great deal of effort over and above the normal workload of a professor and a level of patience and perseverance not found in many university students. This paper will report on a successful academic collaboration between two very different disciplines: philosophy and business. It will examine a course taught jointly by the two disciplines in a strategy of imbrication attempted by a college of York University in Toronto, Atkinson College, housing both liberal arts and professional school.

**Keywords:** advertising, collaboration, cybernetics, education, imbrication, marketing, Plato

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the York University academic year of 2003-2004, Professor Claudio Durán and I set out to teach Atkinson College's first and only imbricated course. But we had been talking about it for many years prior to this.

Atkinson College – Atkinson College no longer exists at York University, having merged with the Faculty of Arts to form the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies, but for more than a quarter century it was a special place where full-time professors taught their full course load in the evening and summers. The college specialized in offering university study to part-time and mature students, with more than two thirds of our students being full-time working adults returning to university. Another large number were university-age students who could not afford to go to school full-time without working. The college consisted of a large liberal arts component, teaching all the subjects taught during the day at the York Faculty of Arts, and a

professional studies side consisting largely of the Department of Administrative Studies, offering a business degree called the Bachelor of Administrative Studies. Both programmes were available only on a part-time basis, although students could conceivably take four evening courses and a Saturday course in a week and proceed as full-time students. We had functioned since 1962 as two separate entities: the liberal arts side of the college and the business side. York University, like other universities in Canada, is government funded.

When I first started teaching at Atkinson College, my department on the fifth floor did not have enough room for me there, so I landed on the sixth floor among the Philosophers. This changed the direction of my research in ways that have been rewarding to me personally and professionally. The move suited me well. While my terminal degree was in business (major in marketing), I had always, since studying at a fine small liberal arts college in Illinois, Shimer College, possessed a strong interest in philosophical discussion and in the roots of our Western education system in Plato and Socrates. On the sixth floor of Atkinson College, among the Philosophers, I met Professor Claudio Durán whose terminal degree was in philosophy and who had always possessed a strong interest in mass media, advertising and ethics. Business and liberal arts are not natural companions, but while our respective departments often battled, Professor Durán and I often met to discuss our mutual research interests, often over lunch or dinner at Atkinson before classes. One of our favourite topics of conversation was the idea of teaching a course together, combining our mutual interest in philosophy, ethics, and advertising.

Professor Durán had often guest lectured in my courses, addressing logic and introducing us to the work of fellow York professor Michael

Gilbert, who originated the theory of multi-modal argumentation. We both now used this theory in our research and in our classrooms. I became a frequent guest lecturer in Professor Durán's course titled Philosophical and Ethical Issues in the Mass Media, where I brought the application of logic and multi-modal argumentation to advertising.

Imbrication – The dictionary definition of the word *imbrication* tells us that it derives from the Latin *imbricare*, to cover with gutter tiles, to form like a roof or gutter tile from the Latin *imbrix*, a gutter tile, from *imber*, rain. The word imbricate means “lying over each other in regular order, like tiles on a roof, as the scales on the cup of some acorns; overlapping each other at the margins, without any involution” [13]. A shorter definition gets to the point of the use of the word at Atkinson College, “to place so as to overlap”. I describe the definition in fine detail because at the time that we were asked, as university professors, to develop “imbricated courses”, none of us knew what that meant. Dean Ron Bordessa and the Working Group responsible for this strategy had in mind to take the two diverse parts of Atkinson College and put them together in a collaborative way so they were each part of the integrated whole and overlapped.

To understand imbrication, one also needs to understand the difference between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary studies. Multidisciplinary studies bring together the separate expertise of two or more scholars from different fields of study; they each approach the problem from the viewpoint of their respective fields. Interdisciplinary studies also bring together two or more scholars but they approach the problem together, as a team, each building on the knowledge and expertise of the other. Most universities offer multidisciplinary programmes but they cannot be called interdisciplinary work. We might observe, for example, a course on Long Term Space Travel taught by a professor of physics during the fall term, and then by a professor of sociology in the winter term, each teaching and testing separately. Most undergraduate students are required to take several courses outside their major discipline, one hopes as different as possible from their major discipline.

Thus a student might be majoring in marketing but take electives in the Music Department in music of the Middle Ages. A school might offer a joint programme between two disciplines, where each discipline would contribute its own offering to the student's learning. The proposed imbrication would see courses designed and taught together by faculty from the liberal arts and the business sides, with a vision of both professors in the classroom at the same time, teaching together students from different disciplines.

## 2. THE FIXED POINTS

Plato – Plato lived from 428 or 427 to 348 or 347 B.C. in Ancient Greece where he taught students using the Socratic Method. He was a pupil of Socrates. It has been said that our current education methods in Western society have their direct roots in Plato's teaching and writing. Plato also is known for his theory of Forms, wherein we evaluate what we can or cannot truly know.

Socrates – From Socrates we have no writing at all, only what Plato wrote about him. He lived in Greece from 470 to 399 B.C. before being condemned to death by drinking hemlock for his unusual teaching methods. His unusual method is what we know today as the Socratic Method. In this way of teaching, the teacher asks carefully chosen questions and encourages the student to learn the truth through logically questioning his assumptions.

Hunt – Shelby D. Hunt serves as one of marketing's cornerstones of academic theory, bringing to the discipline a thorough understanding of the field, and of its links to other fields going as far back as Plato and Socrates. He teaches marketing as the Jerry S. Rawls and P.W. Horn Professor of Marketing at Texas Tech University. He has served as editor of the *Journal of Marketing*, and his work has recently been selected to be published in Sage Publications' “Legends in Marketing” series.

Rotfeld – Herbert Jack Rotfeld is a self-labelled iconoclast, Professor of Marketing at the Auburn University College of Business, but with a watchful eye always on the world of

misplaced marketing. He edits the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, serves as President-Elect of the American Academy of Advertising, and writes a regular column on how marketing can be misused, especially advertising.

Durán and Ripley – Professors Claudio Durán and Louise Ripley (author) are both professors in the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies at York University in Toronto. Professor Durán teaches philosophy and Professor Ripley teaches business and women’s studies. Both have been winners of the Atkinson College Alumni/ae Award for Teaching Excellence and consider teaching their life’s work.

### 3. TEACHING THE COURSE

Professor Durán’s terminal degree was in philosophy, with its links to logic, argumentation, and classical studies, but he also held an abiding interest in advertising and ethics. My terminal degree was in business with its links to advertising and ethics but I also held an abiding interest in logic, argumentation, and classical studies. We both were interested in the role of philosophy in helping us understand questions of ethics, whether in advertising or elsewhere.

While our respective departments fought grand battles on the floors of Council and Senate, Professor Durán and I frequently ate together in a quiet corner of the Faculty Club and tallied all the advantages of working in a college that combined both liberal arts and business. Knowing I was interested in finding ways of analyzing the ethics of advertisements, Professor Durán introduced me to Professor Michael Gilbert, also in philosophy at York, in the Faculty of Arts. We actually met on the picket lines during York faculty’s 1997 fifty-five day strike. It was from Professor Gilbert that I learned multi-modal argumentation theory and invited Professor Durán to my courses a number of times to teach my students the basics of logic and argumentation. As my research progressed in the area, Professor Durán invited me a number of times to give a guest lecture in his classes. Particularly suited to this arrangement was his course entitled, “Philosophical and Ethical Issues in the Mass

Media”. We began to speak regularly and excitedly about the idea of teaching the course together. When the strategy of imbrication was introduced, we recognized our chance.

We planned the course together, creating a new (and online) course syllabus that laid out in detail how the course would be organized, combining readings and instruction in both logic and advertising. We started the course with Plato writing in the *Gorgias* [8] about the teaching method of Socrates and the concepts of argument and persuasion and the good of society. We then moved through Formal and Informal Logic, using the work of Morris Engel [3]. In the second half of the course, we moved to the work of Shelby Hunt, a modern-day marketing scholar who bases his study of marketing theory in philosophy as it came down to us through Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. Hunt himself says, “...we shall see that many of the current debates in marketing and the social sciences were argued (perhaps better) in Plato’s time” [7]. Shelby Hunt introduces his book, *Modern Marketing Theory*, with a quote from Epictetus, a Greek born Roman slave of the second century.

*Question: Prove to me I should study logic!*

*Answer: How would you know it was a good proof? [7]*

Plato, Hunt claims, defined knowledge as “justified true belief”. For Plato true philosophical wisdom must pass the test of critical discussion, the Socratic Method of today. This fits not only with Hunt’s view on how we should view marketing theory but also with the enlightened system of education which encourages more student participation. It also provides a method to examine the logic in advertisements as we look at advertising as in pragma-dialectics, as a dialogue between advertiser and consumer, where we will examine the exchange to understand what tactics are being used in order to sell [9]. Hunt also reminds us of Plato’s theory of Forms, which is most useful in examining pictures as verbal arguments [6]. Coming out of the school of thinking of Pythagoras, and enamoured of the concept of abstract terms in mathematics, Plato set forth a theory that abstract ideas or

essences had an ultimate reality outside of how we saw them. What we perceived through senses, Plato said, was only an imperfect copy of the ideal thing, and we could therefore only know things as we perceived them. This links directly to Hunt's chart on the differences between positivist/empiricist science and relativistic/constructionist science whereby we find many realities in a science that is a "social process" as opposed to a science where it is possible to discover the "true nature of reality" [7].

We used a paper by Ripley [10] to study the use of Gilbert's multi-modal argumentation theory [4,5] in examining advertising as it is seen by advertisers. We used articles by Professor Durán on the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio* [1,2], which provided another link to the use of logic and multi-modal argumentation theory in analyzing arguments.

We wrapped up the course with chapters from Herbert Jack Rotfeld's book, *Adventures in Misplaced Marketing* [12]. This book, in its argument that marketing when abused often results in outcomes not in the best interests of society, brought us full-circle back to Plato's work in examining the ethics of persuading the masses, where we had started in the fall. Rotfeld maintains that it is not right to criticize marketing in the way that many people do, citing the number of people who approach him as total strangers and demand, "...how dare you advertise cigarettes to children!" as if, because he studies marketing, he were personally responsible for what is instead a reflection of society's wants. Research consistently shows, says Rotfeld, that "people are very resistant to the persuasive efforts of marketing tools". Marketers wish they possessed the power that critics accuse them of having [12]. There is the further issue of whether an advertiser of a consumer good, such as perfume or body wash, is the one totally responsible for the public's attitudes toward casual sex or violence against women. Rotfeld maintains that they are not, as does Ripley [9,10,11]. Marketers are generally reflecting what a large part of our society already believes. Rotfeld describes two types of misplaced marketing, the first where the seller did not consider the consumer in the proposed

campaign, a lack of the marketing concept. The second occurs when marketing is used properly but it may not have been done in the best interests of society, such as the marketing of cigarettes, liquor distillers, gun companies, or pornographers to the wrong people. He cites the example of a new beer appealing to low-income black consumers. All of this is helpful as we contemplate the arguments made in the advertisements that sell these products.

Following from Plato and returning to him through works in logic, argumentation, and advertising, both Professor Durán and I taught together in the classroom for every class for the full year. We tried to avoid both of us standing at the front of the room, lest we intimidate students. We like to think of ourselves as anything but intimidating but two professors at the front of a classroom is an oddity for students. In a college that held evening classes from 7:00 to 10:00 p.m., after years of budget cuts, class sizes grew too large for good discussion, so we arranged the three hour class differently. Half the students came for a tutorial with both professors from 6:00 to 7:00 p.m. There followed a lecture and full class discussion from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m., and then a tutorial with both professors from 9:00 to 10:00 p.m. for the second half of the students. Assignment to tutorials was not rigidly enforced, and students could move between early and late tutorial as it suited their schedules. Formal lectures were rare; we strongly encouraged full class participation and utilized a variety of pair and share, small group work, and other pedagogical exercises that kept students engaged.

The course was well received. Students loved the chance to interact with others from different disciplines and the course produced one award-winning paper by two students, one from philosophy and one from marketing. The Dean at that time, Dean Rhonda Lenton (who succeeded Dean Bordessa) heard about our course and asked if she might visit. We invited her to show up at any time. The Dean arrived during a period when the whole class was together for the two-hour lecture and discussion. Professor Durán was on one side of the room and I on the other, and a lively discussion was proceeding, bouncing from

student to student with occasional input from us. Our dean was highly impressed. At that time we were teaching the course experimentally with each of us receiving only half the full-course teaching credit, something we did not want to continue in a unionized Faculty. The Dean arranged the next time we taught the course together, for us each to get full teaching credit for teaching a full-year course. This is not sustainable, however, especially in a college and university facing continual budget cuts.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

There is no satisfactory answer to the budgetary problems that inhibit fair payment for two professors of an imbricated course. Professor Durán although retired, still teaches at York University and University of Chile, and I am teaching mostly online. But we still count as some of the best years of our combined eighty-plus years of teaching experience our imbricated course that brought together students of philosophy and business to study with a professor of philosophy and a professor of business, reading the works of men who can serve as tokens for stability in academic work that has come down to us, in many changing ways in a rapidly changing world. What does change, for the good, is our continued ability, while applying the old classics to our teaching, to apply new classics in research to what we already know and are teaching. This is particularly appropriate to a collaborative imbricated course.

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