Occasional Address

Royal Exhibition Building, Thursday 26 July 2018, 4.00pm

Professor Rachel Fensham
Assistant Dean, Digital Studio, Faculty of Arts

When I started to prepare this address, I had no idea that a story about a cave would be in everybody's minds because of the epic rescue two weeks ago of a young football team in Thailand. The cave story I had decided to share with you is a classic one that Plato the Greek philosopher in the fourth century BCE used to describe the process of education as a dialogue between Socrates, a teacher and a student Glaucon.

In this version of the cave analogy, there are a group of prisoners chained in a cave, thus trapped, and facing the cave wall. Behind them is a fire and in front of the fire there are puppeteers who make shadows appear on the wall that the prisoners can see flickering, representing things and making up stories. Also behind them is a passage that leads upwards towards the sunlight, and into the outer world where the real things exist that have solid forms and are not shadows.

For Plato, the shadows are only substitutes for knowledge given the illusory nature of representation, and an education is therefore the understanding that there are ideal forms or concepts outside the cave that we should instead grasp as truths of reality. Another way of putting this might be to think of the difference between fake news and real news, with fake news being a series of shadowy representations of the real and the true, or evident.

So what has this to do with being a student? During the last few years there may have been times when you felt like a prisoner, when you felt chained to your desk and when you'd prefer to have been hanging out with your friends, or working in paid jobs. Did you at times feel as if you were in the dark, trying to work out how to follow the reading, or to draft that essay or answer the questions on that set assignment? And perhaps at another time you realised how difficult it was to grasp the case studies that you were examining whether in sociology, literature or applied fields such as linguistics and engineering. You may have seen the shadows lit by the fire of opinion and wondered how those things you were reading about were different from or aligned with what exists in the real world. For Plato, it is this realisation that we are often caught in the shadows while seeking understanding that is the prize and purpose of education.

I hope that you too had university teachers, like Socrates, who taught you the value of asking questions about what you see and what you read, and what is the difference between symbolic form and more scientific observation and how each of the different disciplines you have studied provide their own understandings for you to grasp aspects of reality.

As you move from the cave of your university studies towards a growing understanding of the realities of life itself, however long and tortuous that journey might be, the implications of the digital revolution are likely to impinge more and more on social life. One of my roles for the Faculty at the moment is that of managing the Digital Studio which is a research centre for integrating digital technology with the best thinking and knowledge of the humanities and social sciences. We curate projects analysing large datasets such as

parliamentary records or military archives, we make virtual exhibitions from Shakespeare's plays or fortune-telling in nineteenth century Chicago, and find out how young people create identities and communities through their use of social media. The digital environment is thus a new and expanding field of research, in which the question that Marshall McLuhan asked in 1964, of whether the medium is the message or the message is the medium, comes into sharp focus. For McLuhan the medium as with Plato's shadows is considered something that distracts the 'watchdog of the mind' from realising that the form in which a message is received will also shape our understanding of the content.

In the last year, we've had the exposure of interference in elections by Cambridge Analytica, a scheme revealing the potential complicity of university researchers with marketing strategists working for big business and sovereign states; and we've had the confusing concept of 'fake news' circulating as an accusation aimed at both the mainstream media and those who genuinely perpetrate misinformation in our political and social sphere.

So, where do you come in? what is the future for university graduates in this world of digital information and immersive digital environments? Will you be trapped in this digital cave, or will you be able to discern between its representational shadows and life's realities. The world will need many workers who stop to ask questions about how best to solve a problem whether that of delivering healthcare, managing a cultural organisation, working as a teacher, or serving within a government or corporate enterprise. You will be skilled at defining problems, and asking questions about which kind of evidence is most reliable and how one set of facts might alter or change our understanding of what seems to be common sense. You will be the ones that have a grasp of whether something seems shadowy or fake, because that is what you have had to find for yourself as you navigate coursework, interpretation and writing skills, in a university education.

Many would argue that the inside and outside of the cave is no longer a useful analogy for education, or that now the medium is indeed the message. On the other hand, I believe the seemingly individual experience of learning has to be accompanied by the very complex social apparatus of making sense of where we now belong in a global and mediated reality. I am sure you all realise to what extent you have been supported in your educational journey by family, friends, and those amazing experts who have at times guided you along the way. Moreover, you have now acquired a set of tools and approaches to understandings from your chosen degree studies. You have survived your Cave experience and become a graduate. Now you are the ones who can sort out the wrong turns and the fake news from the best, most sensible options, and you will be the expert practitioners who make an amazing contribution to the global efforts of fairness, hard work and cooperation.
I would like therefore to congratulate you all on this achievement – and wish you every best endeavour over the next few years in your chosen path as a graduate of the University of Melbourne.

Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

Today we are fortunate to welcome as guest speaker a prominent dance and theatre scholar based at the University of Melbourne, Professor Rachel Fensham.

Since 2012, Rachel has held several senior positions within the University, as a Professor of Theatre and Dance in the Faculty of Arts, Head of the School of Culture and Communication, and most recently, the Assistant Dean of the Digital Studio in the University's new Arts West building.

Rachel has been a leading figure in the University's growing work in the field of digital humanities, using today's technology to enrich and stimulate research in "traditional" scholarly areas within the humanities and social sciences.

Rachel first graduated with a Bachelor Arts with Honours, and later with a Graduate Diploma of Movement and Dance, and a Master of Arts, from the University of Melbourne. She holds a PhD from Monash University.

Rachel is also Chief Investigator on several significant Government-funded research programs, including the ARC Linkage project, "Creative Convergence: Enhancing Impact in Regional Theatre for Young People".

Her books include The Dolls' Revolution: Australian theatre and cultural imagination *(co-authored with Denise Varney.*

It is a pleasure to call on her to address us today. Please welcome Professor Rachel Fensham.