

IBEI Graduation Talk (Barcelona September 6, 2021)

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Dear graduates, parents, friends, partners, and family. Dear colleagues. Dear members of the faculty.

When I was approached with the question whether I would be willing to give a speech during your graduation ceremony, my first reaction was obviously delight, ..., followed immediately by a sense of profound dread. What was I supposed to say after almost 18 months of intermittent Covid lockdowns? I may know a lot about Zoom etiquette by now. But any relevant real world experiences that I could share seem a bit hazy.

So what did I do? As any good academic, I started out with a review of what's already out there. What is the state of the art in the world of graduation speeches? Find the giants and stand on their shoulders! Fortunately, the best graduation speeches are on YouTube. So researching this was easy. Nothing to take me out of my digital comfort zone. In fact, my research probably in many ways resembled your experiences of the IBEI online seminars that you attended en masse after we all had to desert the classrooms.

What did I find? The first to draw my attention was obviously Alice Cooper. ALICE COOPER, the grandfather of heavy metal does graduation speeches?! I HAD to watch this. So what did he have to say? I quote the essential part of his speech: "Whatever you do, avoid mediocrity. Mediocrity is your enemy".

Ok, that was nice and aspirational. But it did not really fit. I don't usually wear make-up or show up to work bare-chested. And I actually even got a haircut for this speech. Alice Cooper certainly didn't do so for his! And let's be honest, when you walked into IBEI classes towards the end of the first term, and everyone was exhausted from the many essays, exams and other assignments, there may have been some signs of mediocrity around you.

The next big hitter was J.K. Rawlings, the author of the Harry Potter novels. Her speech has become famous for the description of Rawlings' experience of failure and poverty. And how this helped her strip away all the inessential things, and to focus only on what was truly important to her. Which was writing and telling stories. And which made her rich and famous.

Now, doing what you really care about and what you are really good at is certainly something that I would recommend to you. But I also do not want to wish you failure. If you can go down directly the Alice Cooper road and avoid mediocrity or worse, than I'd be even happier for you (and you should expect to be invited to give one of IBEI's graduation speeches very soon in the future).

But there are other, less widely noted parts of her speech that resonated. These had to do with the power of empathy, imagination, and the use of the skills and career opportunities that a university degree affords, to improve the life of those less fortunate. I quote:

“If you choose to use your status and influence to raise your voice on behalf of those who have no voice; if you choose to identify not only with the powerful, but with the powerless; if you retain the ability to imagine yourself into the lives of those who do not have your advantages, then it will not only be your proud families who celebrate your existence, but thousands and millions of people whose reality you have helped change.”

I realize of course that not all of you will be fortunate enough to change the life of millions, let alone thousands of people. But it is good to remind ourselves that in this day and age, a graduate degree like that of IBEI still tends to confer status. And that status should confer some responsibility to be of help to those less advantaged.

The third speaker that I looked at came to this theme of education from a slightly different angle. I am talking about the famous Stanford graduation address by Steve Jobs. I paraphrase from his script here, because it is his broader story that matters, not specific quotes.

An adopted child, Steve’s non-college educated working class parents spent all their life savings to honor the wish of his biological mother that he should receive university education. But after six months in college Steve couldn’t see the value in this. In his own words:

“I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life and no idea how college was going to help me figure it out. And here I was spending all of the money my parents had saved their entire life. So I decided to drop out and trust that it would all work out OK.”

Which it obviously did. Although Steve suffered terrible health problems later in his life, dropping out of college certainly did not harm his professional prospects. To go with Alice Cooper, there was little mediocrity in his life!

Now, I have to admit that I am not a Macintosh-man myself. In fact, I sometimes felt uneasy by the degree of idolization received by a man who was a wonderful designer and technical visionary, but who could be a pretty hard-nosed business man; and whose company often seems to place its extraordinarily high profit margins above even the most basic responsibilities that it owes to the societies in which it operates.

But there is something in Steve Job’s story that I think resonates with the state of the world that provided the background for when you decided to come to IBEI, and during the time that you spent here in Barcelona.

I know from our discussions in class and beyond that many of you were struck by how strongly societies over those past years seem to have become divided along the lines of education. In important places like the US, the UK and many other parts of the world, voting and political opinions now seem to differ visibly between those who have some form of higher education and those who do not. For those of us comfortable in our high-skilled, cosmopolitan bubbles like IBEI, it is also painful to see how science and learned opinions are increasingly rejected by important parts of the media, politics, and society.

Now, I personally get a bit itchy when it is suggested that to overcome these problems, we should simply provide more university education to everyone. In terms of practical feasibility that still seems a long way off. And it may simply engender another rat race for even higher qualifications. So [perhaps] what the example of Steve Jobs shows - and

that of many other people who did not build multi-billion dollar empires - is that there are other, equally fulfilling ways out there to lead a good life.

But I think that the tumultuous social and political events especially of the past 18 months of a pandemic emergency did teach us something about the value and essence of education that I would like you to take away from your time at IBEI. I don't mean to belabour the old liberal arts cliché that a degree from a social science institute like ours is not primarily meant to fill you up with specific pieces of knowledge, but rather to teach you how to think.

Still, what we have learned over the past 18 months is that things that we thought we knew were often highly uncertain; and that in extreme circumstances, knowledge – especially of the scientific kind – can become outdated very quickly. Just like your Masters' dissertations and much of the academic research of myself and my colleagues here at IBEI, scientific discovery can go into countless dead ends and rabbit holes before a clear picture and 'story' emerges. For us academics, that convoluted process of knowledge production is part of our daily bread and butter (and it enables us to attend all those nice conferences and workshops that we used to go to before the pandemic).

But sadly, what we have learned during the last year and a half is that, in some circumstances, the speed of discovery and the way we make use of new information generated can be a matter of life and death. To me, the most striking experience during those first months of the pandemic was really how little we knew about this disease (which comes from a family of well-studied viruses after all!), nor what to do about it. This involved medical questions well outside the comfort zone of social science graduates like ourselves, such as the benefits of mask wearing or the effectiveness and possible side effects of different vaccines. On these matters, scientific consensus could change on an almost daily basis and with every new study published.

But also in the area of public policy, which is closer to your and my ballpark, the degree of uncertainty could be tremendous. How difficult it seemed to navigate the way between the alternative policy options available and the multiple trade-offs and heavy social impacts they all involved! And I must say that, looking back with some degree of hindsight, I still struggle to see –within a reasonable range of comparisons- which country or region actually did best. Because things fluctuated so much, and the specific drivers and long-term consequences of different policies are still so uncertain or hard to attribute with any degree of analytical rigour.

Now, with climate change increasingly showing its teeth, and other problems like social injustices, weak global governance, and state failures still unresolved, we should be realistic enough to assume that your generation will mostly likely be exposed to other extreme situations of this kind.

And I wish sincerely that in these circumstances, some of the skills that you acquired here at IBEI will be of help as you go on to forge your own paths in your personal and professional lives.

To me, the liberal arts cliché of learning how to think in these contexts of uncertainty really means to be sufficiently humble about the things that we believe we know; and to remain aware of the far greater range of things that we probably do not, and cannot yet know.

Here, I want to bring in the last speaker that I came across. It is the novelist David Foster Wallace. He said that, “learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think.”

Building on this quote, I want you to be careful and thoughtful in how you take on new knowledge and ideas. To continue to learn to distinguish between good and bad information. And to remain sufficiently open-minded to revise your opinions and strategies when you see good and well-founded reasons to do so.

Because if you don't, you will not only be “totally hosed” by potentially unimportant information – which is another quote from Wallace-. But also too inflexible to respond to the pace at which new Mega-events appear to be coming our way.

Now, all of this suggests a lot of humbleness and moderation. But having gotten to know many of you for a year or longer, I know that you have the minds, the commitment, and the energy to truly make a difference. So, in closing, I want to throw our wise old friend Alice Cooper back into the mix. Be humble and realistic about what you know and what you don't know.

But also avoid mediocrity whenever you can.

Welcome to the growing community of IBEI alumni that is already out there, waiting to connect with you. Do stay in touch. And all the very best for your future endeavors.

Frank-Borge Wietzke

Graduation speech for the 2019-2020 cohort of IBEI students. Delivered 06.09.2021.