

Imagine if ... We *rise* with tomorrow's challenges

Ms Heather A. Thuynsma

Department of Political Sciences & Faculty of Humanities: Dean's Office

What does it mean to learn across boundaries, borders, and institutions? This is not to imply that such approaches should be withdrawn or abandoned, but rather that they should be re-defined, given the rising funding restraints and the remarkable technological opportunities the recent pandemic has inspired.

As an institution, the University of Pretoria aspires to be 'a future-focused, leading African university' that 'makes today matter' by encouraging our students to think critically while finding 'their own voice and passion'. We pride ourselves on our ability to teach 'a hybrid curriculum that provides ... equitable access' and prepares students for their future by 'encouraging innovation' and interdisciplinarity 'across platforms and various [not all] faculties'. Our goal is to produce sustainable 'African solutions for global problems' and to do so 'by empowering our communities'. We purport to teach 'responsible leadership and inclusivity' that is ethically bound and grounded in compassion. This all-encompassing *UPWay* statement is so bloated with marketing buzzwords that it sounds clichéd and borders on being impossible to achieve, now or ever.

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Or is it?

Recycling our past

Given our current teaching and learning predisposition, the goals of the *UPWay* is certainly something that might be beyond our fingertips, or at least so within my own Faculty. To achieve these lofty aims, we will need to re-conceive the nature of our faculty, and perhaps even our institution, to compel a rethink in how we teach, research, and learn.

The current system was built to address the challenges of the past, reinforcing a hierarchy of disciplines that entrench the importance of the hard sciences, and an algorithmic logic base above all else. This is, after all, how we were trained to become productive members of the workforce. The words 'if you possess a scientific genius, you will be guaranteed gainful employment' seem to have echoed down through the ages.

There was a certain logic to this approach, and it has certainly served us as an institution and our alumni well over the past century or more – at least in terms of our rankings and the earnings of our staff and students. But there are two very important factors that seem to be missing from this equation – the *human being* and the *future* that human being will have to navigate and, with our help hopefully, create.

The current system supports a very systematic approach that trains students to specialise in one area. Under this system we have successfully graduated students that are tailored to fit specific job profiles, often very well-paid ones at that, within industries focused on manufacturing, technical prowess, or policy. And in the twentieth century such training helped those of us who rose within it, to cope with a particular set of circumstances. This is also an era that expected humans to join an organisation, to remain loyal to it, and to then retire from it with a golden handshake.

40 Things look very different now, and our language reflects it. The past year has seen terms such as ‘a new normal’, ‘business unusual’ and ‘fit for purpose’ creep into our lexicon. We have heard more about climate change, and have certainly been overwhelmed by uncertainty and the precariousness of this moment. In our enforced isolation, we have resorted to our pre-programmed coping mechanisms – to be suspicious of all things new and to reinforce the inequity, intolerance, and injustice embedded deep in our psyche by the generations that have gone before (Anderson, Rainie & Vogels 2021). Like it or not, this mentality contributes to behaviour such as vaccine hesitancy.

We have, however, unwittingly contributed to our students’ demand for solutions from others, instead of looking for possible solutions from within themselves.

Historically this institution, like so many others in this country, has relied on a rigid standardised curriculum that produces students who are eager to conform. They are taught to excel within a specific area by painting very carefully within clearly specified lines. Generalists are frowned upon, if not condemned, and the interests these students developed as children are weeded out in favour of skills that will help them endure employment. In other words, this is a system that was fit for one purpose; to make a person employable in a setting best suited for a bygone era.

The questions are: are these skills adequate to help today’s students *rise with* the challenges of tomorrow? A tomorrow that most of us in today’s academia will

never see, and simply cannot imagine?

There are those who will say that we have persevered despite the hardships the past few years have foisted on us. To a degree this is true, but at what cost?

As we emerge from this period of prolonged isolation, we have changed in ways that may never be reversed. As staff we will have to cope with our students', and indeed our own, deteriorating mental health, physical atrophy, and an ever-growing range of anxieties (Kreider 2021: 2). Our limited reserves of resilience have been depleted, and what we have left is being drained by the effort of just making it through today, with the distant hope that tomorrow will be just that much better.

But this solitude has also given us time to think, and our thinking could possibly upset the status quo.

Re-sourcing for the future

Students are opting to spend more time walking the now virtual halls of tertiary institutions, while they wait for an economic uptick that will open up new employment possibilities.

According to Treharne (2020), globally 38% of young people now attend tertiary education institutions. This is an increase of 14% on the figure for 1990. Within the next ten years, current projections are that half of all young people will be accepted to study, and some countries will see graduates 'constitute two-thirds of the workforce'. As Francis Green and Golo Henseke (2020) explain, given the increasing cost of higher education and the underemployment of the graduates the current system produces, some are questioning the purpose or competitive edge that higher education institutions offer.

To cope with this student influx, academics are encouraged to embrace the convenience of online and digital learning technologies with their standardised assessments at the expense of a more personalised, more human approach.

If the future is to be driven by technology and algorithms with its propensity to distribute misinformation and 'tele-everything', as a Pew Research Report suggests (Anderson, Rainie & Vogels 2021; World Bank 2019: 9), then tomorrow's students are at risk of becoming similarly mechanistic and even more materialistic (Butler 2020). Under such conditions, there is certain to be a rise in anxiety, in social inequity, and in authoritarian tendencies, each of which serve to compromise the very fabric of our society.

Such template-drive conditions could easily see the value of critical enquiry relegated to a 'lower-order' research status. In doing so, our students could lose the ability to provoke and appreciate different and often contentious perspectives in response to uncomfortable scenarios. Intolerance of opinions that differ, and the blanket acceptance of every statement as fact, will continue to foster compliance at the expense of principles and, indeed, of our humanity.

These are some of the challenges that our individual courses must equip students to counter.

42 Technology is evolving into a future workplace that will include new job portfolios focused on increasing productivity and improving service delivery (World Bank 2019: 9) at a pace faster than we could ever imagine. This means that the new workplace demands employees that are tech-savvy and able to problem-solve on the fly. But to thrive in this pressured environment, people will need to balance these harder skills with softer sensibilities such as perseverance, collaboration, and empathy. These cannot be acquired overnight; they must be embedded as part of a holistic curriculum that embraces human complexity, promotes innovation, and, in essence, redefines our understanding of intelligence and ability. In short, students need to learn to work with uncertainty, be encouraged to make their own mistakes, to use their experiences to fortify their natural resilience, and to develop their own solutions to the challenges they encounter.

This is a tall order, and one that depends on awakening each student's curiosity and imagination. Technical prowess builds functionality. But to be good problem-solvers, our students will need to tap into their right brain neuro sequences and learn from disciplines that explore the creative.

We need to create conditions under which we teach students to embrace interdisciplinarity, to see further and to experiment with directions that are not always orthodox. To ask questions that draw on their own lived reality and to challenge established methods. In this way, a student will benefit from a cross-disciplinary input and will contribute towards re-mapping our traditional disciplines which will, in turn, broaden their perceptions both within a classroom and extramurally (Butler 2020).

To undertake such an expansive initiative requires a curriculum that creates conditions for our students to flourish. A system that recognises that collaboration is key and that mistakes breed original and imaginative ideas that have value; value that shapes and re-shapes a future rather than confining it. Such a system

should tap into a team of different aptitudes and experiences, and be guided by a unit of mentors that provoke new lines of enquiry and stimulate a climate rich with possibility.

Rising with our challenges

We can succeed only by concert ... The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise – with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.

Abraham Lincoln, 1 December 1862¹

Abraham Lincoln's address came almost two years into a civil war, when he was desperate to find a way to rekindle hope amongst his political and military allies, and stop a nation from tearing itself apart, family member by family member. And while we do not have to wage war in the same way as Lincoln, as teachers and researchers we must help our student's battle their own challenges in the months and years ahead. Part of this battle is to help students build their inner confidence and hone their natural need to make their mark.

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These fundamental drivers are what feed our academic curiosity and compel all of us to push our conceptual boundaries. We are searching for a way to harness this natural disposition to solve some of our society's most compelling issues. We need an approach that urges students to do the same – an approach that will help them challenge the things we take for granted to, in Lincoln's words, 'disenthrall ourselves' of the 'dogmas of the quiet past' that are 'inadequate [for] ... the stormy present' and reflect on the experience and effect of our actions so that we can 'think anew, and act anew'.

It is from these 'seeds of discontent', to quote Oscar Wilde (2001: 259), that a new system has been tested that leverages technology and engages students in a multidisciplinary collaborative project to solve complex, real-world problems. Aspects of this approach are what UP's Department of Political Sciences, together with its Global Classroom partners in Brazil (FAAP), France (Le Mans), and the US

¹ This statement concluded Lincoln's annual message to Congress, in which he proposed controversial measures such as remunerative emancipation (Hay & Nicolay 2009, 401).

(University of Akron), have been experimenting with for the past four years: an approach that could help us all truly achieve the ideals of the *UPWay*.

A challenge-based curriculum and a global classroom

The Global Classroom partners have designed a module that teaches our students not only to collaborate across borders, languages, and cultures, but also across disciplines. Past classes have incorporated guest presenters from literature, politics, geography, business, and science backgrounds to tackle a variety of topics, ranging from the effects of misinformation, to critical feminist approaches, to decolonial texts, to the business of politics, to the complexities of reversing the global climate crisis. The last two years under the pandemic lockdown have spurred collaborative student-led classes that investigated various lockdown measures and their effect on issues of equality, social justice, and human contact (or the lack thereof). Under these circumstances, students have worked alongside each other and the course's team of lecturers to study these topics and share their findings.

44 Through some trial and error, the class has managed to collect enough data to evolve its approach to engage more community experts. This helped students to compare their data with that of their colleagues in the other four countries, and adapt their findings to make more of a difference in their specific communities. The goal has been to create a learning environment that mirrors the 21st century workplace described earlier. But our efforts are still limited to our specific networks that are primarily based in the humanities. Nevertheless, what the class and its lectures did instinctively, almost reflexively, has been developed into a more holistic teaching and learning model known as challenge-based learning (CBL).

Used extensively through the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU), CBL classes look to explore topics from many angles by working in collaborative groups (but not on group projects), use widely accessible technology to tackle challenges faced by their communities, nations, or globally, by drawing on the perspectives, skills, and data from very different disciplines. And most importantly, the students are encouraged to write up their research as individual papers that are shared with other students for further discussion and debate.

This means that lecturers must change their mindset from being the sole repositories of information, to being facilitators. They must evolve from driving their own perspectives to helping students understand and apply a range of approaches to develop questions and new ideas about problems that are closer to the students' lived experiences. This power shift takes teaching away from rote learning and grows a student's ability to work collaboratively with others across disciplines, cultures, and languages, and to take responsibility for their own learning while triggering their more creative insights and empathetic sensibilities.

The approach also encourages students to work their way through the natural research process, and practise thinking in a critical yet structured manner. They work with their lecturers, tutors, and fellow students to understand the assumptions and questions that underpin a particular challenge, and then develop appropriate guiding questions to help them collect data. Students can then hone their internet and library searching skills, and draw on the gathered data to help them formulate an answer to the challenge before sharing it with their colleagues. Where it is possible, and this is certainly not always viable, the solution can be piloted within a smaller community within established university regulations, and then assessed for its applicability and replicability. Students are then urged to use the comments offered by their lecturers and colleagues to refine their approaches before submitting their work for publication. Being able to reflect on a range of assessments and refine their work positively reinforces the learning process. The more regularly these discussion sessions happen, the easier it is for students to manage critique.

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There are tools available to facilitate collaborative workspaces, and it would be good to see how UP students can evolve some of these platforms to suit their particular needs. There are also a variety of media that they can use, such as narrated PowerPoint presentations, challenge proposal videos, and simply writing up a document with their plans and procedures to beta-test solutions – perhaps in the near future UP students will develop isomorphic projections that can interact with viewers and capture their live commentary!

One last but very important component to be included in this interdisciplinary curriculum should be a session that encourages some type of physical movement that can tap into the facilities that TuksSport has, or inspire new modules in movement such as dance or drumming. Movement viscerally helps humans process what they have learnt, and it is equally important for staff and students' intellectual, mental, and physical well-being.

On a very small scale, we have learnt that exposing students to different communities and disciplinary angles helps them appreciate how different subjects connect, which may not always be obvious, and helps them generate new answers and approaches to intractable problems.

Making today matter

If we are to achieve the lofty ideals outlined in the *UPWay* campaign mentioned earlier, this institution will have to re-define what it means to be collaborative and mobile, and our staff will have to embrace a new role as mentors and facilitators.

46 If we are to equip our students to create new perspectives, then each course should ask staff from across our faculties to present how a challenge affects their specific area of study. The effect, for example, on a sustainable supply of natural resources such as food, water, energy and air; public health and the rise of threats such as pandemics; the health and wellbeing of humans and animals; economic fluctuations and our ability to grow the fiscus; how these challenges reshape our sense of personal and cultural identity; and, the role they play in provoking/mitigating conflict and tapping into the very best and worst of our human nature.

Ultimately, each course will train students to adapt to a range of roles, many of them unfamiliar that will help them navigate the ever-evolving world of work. Their roles as researchers, collaborators, scientists, writers, interviewers, publishers, photographers, videographers, and actors will help them become genuine actors of change.

Adopting such an approach will help UP evolve into an institution where students can acquire real-world knowledge, solve real challenges that are present in their communities, and embed life-long skills that they can use to solve the more complex problems that await them in the future. In short, we can truly deliver on our pitch to *Make Today Matter* and in the process help develop *A World of Answers*.

Re-conceiving curricula

As we look to reimagine this institution, we need to appreciate the challenges our students will likely face. They are products of a secondary education system that emphasises rote learning instead of tapping into their true interests, and helping them to find their own unique voice. We need to help them overcome this.

They will need these aspects of their own personalities to help them understand problems, and conceive of solutions that are so distant, that most of the people teaching them will never see. We need to remember that at the heart of this academic project – regardless of the discipline – are human beings with all our foibles and flaws, but with a very real fortitude.

Add to this the fact that the nature of work, as the recent pandemic has shown, has changed to emphasise technology that threatens to intensify current inequities, injustices, and more importantly, intolerances. Our task as university teachers is to provide a curriculum that addresses these circumstances in a manner that fires our students' imagination and gives them a more holistic training that appreciates the technical as well as the ethical, a training that awakens their very human sense of compassion, resilience, and curiosity.

Over the years the Global Classroom has experimented with aspects of such a holistic system and redefined how we ready our students for their professional futures. We have taught them to appreciate different cultures without leaving, certainly in the past year, their own homes. For us each week, students can spend time in three other continents and problem-solve with students from different cultures, who speak different languages, and who hail from vastly different disciplines. This is a new kind of mobility scheme that costs significantly less, yet that opens up a wealth of opportunity.

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My proposal is to adopt a challenge-based system across the institution, starting at third-year level, to offer our students a holistic collaborative curriculum of substance at a cost that is affordable.

This will pose its own challenges for most lecturers. We talk about transforming an institution to appreciate different languages and cultures. In the process, we also need to grow an institution whose staff can escape their disciplinary silos and appreciate the importance of each other's talents and potential input, and not be threatened by it. We must 'think anew, and act anew'.

The humanities, for instance, needs to recognise how mathematical equations influences musical play, linguistics, and political ambition. While engineers need to exercise their creative talents, as their students already do, and the composition of the Camerata Choir suggests – many of the choir members have been male engineering students. We all need to be reminded of the legal precepts that guide us, but we need to balance this with the compassion and understanding of

those who are differently-abled, both physically and mentally. And our students need to appreciate that their ability to communicate and convey their insights might depend on an algorithm that feeds the latest smart phone app as easily as it depends on their proficiency in language and movement. Nature depends on all our abilities to innovate solutions to protect and renew our biosphere, while we feed the desire that fiction and fantasy have sparked to boldly explore new frontiers. And we must encourage such explorations with a set of principles that prize empathy, respect, and justice above all else.

We should use the technological tools at our disposal (and some we are yet to create!) to offer each of our students the breadth of what this institution has to offer and produce well-rounded individuals that will shape humanity's future, not just work in it.

Imagine if ... each course was conceived to help students understand a problem, and that to contextualise this problem, they were exposed to how different disciplines interact with and perceive that problem?

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Imagine if ... those perspectives taught students not only essential technical expertise, but also to appreciate the impact these technologies have on humanity?

Imagine if ... students could *rise with the challenge* to incorporate these different perspectives and develop their own solutions to these problems?

And then, *imagine if ...* they could collaborate and discuss these solutions with students around the world?

Perhaps through such imagination we can achieve the *UPWay*?

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