

## Reinventing International Education: Purpose, Product, Place, and Pedagogy

**INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS** live at the complex intersection of planet and school. Our work inevitably takes place amidst the transformations of the world's human and natural communities, as well as our current system of higher education. These transformations are not only inseparable from our professional mission, but they also summon us to a fundamental rethinking of our educational practice.

In so many ways, the achievements of modern industrial culture have been nothing short of breathtaking. More people in more places live longer, richer, freer lives than ever before. We can travel to distant lands in a matter of hours. From almost anywhere on the planet, we can instantly access the collective knowledge of humankind with only a laptop and an Internet connection. The integration of the world economy, in particular, has raised the quality of life for much of humanity. And yet these stunning achievements have come at a price. Tectonic stresses now run in every direction under the surface of the modern world order: staggering income gaps between rich and poor, nuclear threats, imperial and civil wars, spreading disease and malnutrition, and masses of displaced and trafficked persons. Additionally, half of the world's languages, along with the cultural and intellectual legacy they signify, now teeter on the brink of extinction.

Sorrows also beset the planet's natural communities. Most of the world's rainforests and almost all of the world's old-growth forests have been decimated. With them about a third of our plant and animal species have been lost. Deserts are spreading. The ozone layer is disappearing. Ice sheets are melting. Industrial culture has effectively deforested, plowed, dredged, drained, dammed, bulldozed, and paved over much of the earth's land surface. Modern cities, the scene of most international programs, are already responsible for nearly 70 percent of harmful greenhouse gases. As they morph into colossal megacities over the next few decades, their carbon output is predicted to *double* from today's levels. If this happens,

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James Hansen, one of the world's leading climatologists, claims that it will be "game over" for the habitability of Earth, at least for large numbers of human beings.

In short, the world-stage of international education has nearly exhausted its own life support systems. Some of the world's most respected analysts, including Thomas Homer-Dixon, Jared Diamond, and Elizabeth Kolbert, speak of a planet set for "synchronous failure" and, as a result,

the massive breakdown of the modern way of life. "It may seem impossible to imagine that a technologically advanced society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself," Kolbert writes in *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change* (2006), "but that is what we are now in the process of doing."

These are not people who can be dismissed as alarmist cranks. If their dire warnings are even *possible*, much less *probable*, nearly everything in modern civilization's basic operating system will need to be rethought.

If there was ever a time when our colleges and universities needed to be more watchtower than ivory tower, it is now. Yet they are caught up in their own revolution. Public institutions are suffering reduced investment yet increased regulation. Tuition rates continue to soar and with them student loan debts (now averaging more than \$26,000 per graduate). More graduates compete for fewer decent-paying jobs. Then there is the learning problem: Students don't appear to be getting any smarter. Exposés like Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2010) tell a disturbing tale of schools expecting little of students and, in return, producing low levels of subject-specific learning.



## The Upside of Down

Social, ecological, and cultural systems are dynamic, inherently predisposed to change and, at the same time, to resist change. The challenges today are not the challenges of 40 years ago, and won't be the challenges 40 years from now. Our difficult task is to prepare students, not just for the complexity they face here and now, but for problems they cannot yet foresee, with knowledge not yet developed, using tools not yet invented. A tall order, especially as the planet's vital signs continue to plummet. The upside is that we are compelled to think in fresh ways about how global learning might help create the kind of world we want and need. Einstein famously stated, "The problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking at which we created them." What level of thinking are we currently educating for, and what new level of thinking will be needed for a future of radical surprise, even breakdown?

What follows offers a preliminary response. It proposes four critical shifts—in

purpose, product, place, and pedagogy—for an "internationalized" education in the early twenty-first century. Taken together, they suggest a pattern along which our professional operating system might be reinvented.

### 1. PURPOSE

#### From private benefit to public good.

As countries, corporations, and institutions of higher learning invest billions in "internationalization" campaigns, a fundamental question needs to be asked: & Why are we doing what we are doing? If internationalization is a means to an end, what, exactly, is that end? What is it for? And who does it serve?

There was a time when educational leaders could precisely designate why higher learning existed, and who for. William Rainey Harper, the first president of the University of Chicago, urging universities to go forth "to those who are downcast, taking up its dwelling in the midst of squalor and distress." President Woodrow Wilson echoed

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Franklin and Harper as he addressed the graduating class of 1913 at Swarthmore College: "Do not forget, as you walk these classic places, why you are here," he exhorted them. "You are not here merely to make a living. You are here in order to enable the world to live more amply, with greater vision, with a finer spirit of hope and achievement. You are here to enrich the world, and you impoverish yourself if you forget the errand."

The mission of U.S. higher education underwent a fateful shift in the 1980s. A new generation of school reformers, intent on strengthening the nation's global competi-

tiveness, began to redefine the purpose of college in unabashedly utilitarian terms—as job training for upward mobility. As the dominant outlook turned economic and political, the moral ends of higher education gradually receded into the background. The grammar rarely rose above how to cut costs, boost efficiency, manage risk, increase profitability, and advance rank on the *U.S. News & World Report* list.

During the 1990s, Harvard's Derek Bok, along with Ernie Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, returned to the purpose question. Calling for a reconnection between scholarship and community needs, Bok dared to ask: If universities are the preeminent institution in modern societies, and so good at developing knowledge and training experts, why is so little progress being made in treating the nation's most pressing problems? Boyer, in his now-famous opinion piece published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 9, 1994) titled "Creating the New American College," called for higher education to recover its moral purpose and reverse the drift toward being "a place where professors get tenured and students get credentialed...a private benefit, not a public good."

International education is also vulnerable to mission drift, especially as it juggles a complex and often contradictory mix of mandates. Is our purpose primarily educational—to improve academic quality, develop student talent, and nurture a sense of social responsibility to the world? Or is our work chiefly shaped by market imperatives, whether to generate new revenue streams or to empower graduates for "success" in the knowledge economy? While we no longer have the luxury to choose between the two imperatives, we can decide whether we will be mission driven and market sensitive, or market driven and mission sensitive. Will we allow internationalization to become an end in itself, shaping people with no ends? Or will we reinvent it as a critical pathway to promoting human flourishing through global study, service, and research?

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## 2. PRODUCT

### **From institutional inputs and outputs to integral outcomes.**

Many schools proudly boast of a long and impressive list of international activities and accomplishments. They point to higher rates of study abroad participation, increased numbers of international and minority students, and an expanding portfolio of globally oriented courses and strategic partnerships. In most cases, numbers are used as the metric of success. Quantitative measures can serve an important purpose, especially when the focus is on *inputs* (e.g., amount of human or financial resources) and *outputs* (e.g., number of study abroad or foreign exchange students). But they can also cloud a much more basic question related to our educational product: *What kind of student do we expect to form, for what kind of world?*

The "what" question (outcomes) is inseparable from the "why" question (purpose). What we see for the world inevitably shapes student development. If we view the world as essentially fair and sustainable, with free markets and scientific ingenuity eventually restoring the earth's natural systems and enabling everyone to achieve the "good life," we will want our students to demonstrate outcomes that strengthen their prospects for success within the established order.

On the other hand, if we conclude that unlimited economic growth and unlimited consumption is not possible in a limited world, suddenly the conventional meanings and outcomes attached to "acquiring intercultural competence" or "becoming a global citizen" become not just irrelevant, but positively dangerous. "Without significant precautions," warns Oberlin College's David Orr, "education equips people mere-

ly to be more effective vandals of earth...the plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people." The question we must ask is: intercultural competence *for what?*

Without question, learning to live with our deepest differences is critical within pluralistic societies. But our students will need to do many *other* things over the span of their lifetimes—things we have been unable or unwilling to do. They will need to figure out how to distribute global resources more equitably, reduce greenhouse gases, protect biological diversity, and enable the bottom two billion to realize a life of basic decency. To achieve these outcomes, they must learn to look at situations from the vantage points of competing *systems* of interpretation. Exclusive attention to intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics can create a type of intellectual bubble, effectively eclipsing any sustained analysis of structural conditions operating at national, regional, or global levels.

We need only imagine student pairs shopping on P.C. Hooftstraat in Amsterdam or Calle Serrani in Madrid. While able to demonstrate "effective and appropriate behavior and communication" with salespersons, they remain blissfully ignorant to how the larger process of globalization "impoverishes one place in order to be extravagant in another" (in the words of Wendell Berry). Given the fragile state of the planet, unleashing tens of thousands of intercultural competent and upwardly mobile "global citizens" upon the world will likely compound our problems.

The alternative is to intentionally prepare students to seek solutions from a different perspective from that which

generated the problems in the first place. Thomas Homer-Dixon in *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization* (2006) describes this ability as a *prospective mind*—the capacity to think about and adapt to a world of constant flux, uncertainty, and instability. Training tens of thousands of prospective minds will require a much more inclusive global learning model—one that deliberately integrates disciplinary (cognitive) and intercultural (interpersonal) learning outcomes with outcomes related to global (transdisciplinary and transnational) processes and problems in concrete localities.

### 3. PLACE

#### From geographic distance to socio-cultural difference.

For more than 100 years, international educators have employed geographically marked terms—like *distant lands*, *overseas study*, education *abroad*, and *cross-border education*—to define their work. While

intending to open parochial minds to the larger world, this vocabulary has unwittingly perpetuated a dichotomy between near and far, home and abroad. Today the disconnect is nearly absolute at most colleges and universities. “Diversity” offices are typically in one place, and “internationalization” offices in another. Minority student concerns are treated independent of services for both international students and education abroad students. Study abroad operates in isolation from urban field study and community service learning.

Some schools have tried to repair the linguistic rift by renaming offices as *study away*, *off-campus*, or *global*. Language matters and the shift in emphasis reflects a global context in which *sociocultural* difference, as a distinguishing marker for an “internationalized” education, has become far more important than *geographic* distance. “The nature of the world today,” write Grant Cornwell and Eve Stoddard, “is such that U.S. and global realities, whether economic, cultural, political,

environmental, or social, interpenetrate and mutually define each other to the degree that isolating U.S. studies from international studies is increasingly impractical.” Los Angeles, my own home, is a prime example. One can access residents of a hundred worlds just by walking down the street.

Given this brave new world, our challenge is to *transcend* the artificial and polarizing dualities of the domestic and the international in order to create a programmatic “third place” that emphasizes their interaction and mutual influence. Doing so promotes the public good in at least three ways. First, it reduces the risk of reinforcing students’ obliviousness to local and regional realities. By de-coupling global learning from international travel, we keep the world at our doorstep in the reach of our love. Secondly, it helps solve the access and affordability problem for nontraditional and low-income students—the new majority—by reducing the financial and familial obstacles to program participation. Thirdly, it provides

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4. PEDAGOGY

**From learning for pleasure to learning through travail.**

Perhaps the most stubborn dimension of internationalization has to do with the form and meaning of learning itself. Global learning has excelled at providing students “worlds of experience.” But beyond keeping students steadily *looking at* those worlds, scarce attention has been paid to how their on-the-ground experience might act to dramatically alter their way of *being in* the world.

Conventional study abroad follows a fairly consistent pattern. Students travel through the stratosphere to program sites in Europe or Australia, generally clueless of local realities. Over the next few months or even weeks (terms keep getting shorter and shorter), “bonding” occurs, but not with local residents. More often than not, foreign students live together, eat together and, at night, party together. Days are spent listening to lectures in U.S. student-only classrooms or consuming historical sites through the windows of a tour bus. The tourist bubble also sequesters students from the city’s “back regions”—the pockets

of deprivation and struggle that, worldwide, is “home” to about two-thirds of humanity. Then, come weekends, it’s off to imagined places elsewhere, Grand Tour fashion. Field experiences are essentially pleasurable, with few risks, little adversity, and only functional involvement with mainstream society.

Admittedly, different programs have different learning goals. A two-week, faculty-led art history trip to Florence may not necessarily call for deep emotional investment and visceral connections. Moreover, merely immersing students in unfamiliar social settings doesn’t mean that they are *interacting* with members and their habits in ways that create dissonance and produce deep learning. But this is hardly a concern for most programs. If we err, it’s typically not on the side of over-immersion, but on the side of over-facilitation. Our professional habit is to dictate what, how, where, and when students learn. Doing so may satisfy the security needs of students, but it can unwittingly prevent them from taking the kind of risks that foster empathetic closeness and induce global perspective taking. And without the ability to put themselves into the mind of the other, students are ill prepared to disengage from their culturally anchored identity and explore new possible selves as a basis for imagining alternative responses to the world.

Such an “end game” can hardly be realized through distanced detachment and emotional objectivity. Real education, it is said, is lighting a fire, not filling a bucket. It “leads forth,” not by downloading abstract ideas into students’ minds, but by asking them to do new things with their *bodies*. Students move—physically—from privileged and proper places to places of practical solidarity with those in which the pains of the planet are most visible. The act of voluntary displacement is much more likely to disorient and disturb than to comfort and cheer. A pedagogy of travail will feature voluntary displacement expressed through linguistic immersion and extended residence within disadvantaged communities, coupled with community-driven service and research activities. Instead of thinking their way into

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Virtually every urban system will require reinvention—land-use and transportation, architecture and building, energy provision and food production, water management, and waste cycling. The next 40 years, predicts Stanford Historian Ian Morris, will be the most important in all human history.

technological development. Others reveal *alternative* ways for inhabiting the planet—ways not based on continuous expansion and extraction, combustion and consumption. The North American Amish, for example, live without cars, computers, electricity, natural gas, or insurance of any kind. Yet they have consistently been rated “the happiest people in America.” Cultures like these are not failed attempts at modernity. To the contrary, they have much to teach upwardly mobile U.S. students about interdependence, diet, resource use, labor- and knowledge-intensive technologies dependence, and energy consumption. If we can help this generation learn its lessons well, maybe, just maybe, international education can yet “tip” the current system in a more desirable direction. **IE**

new ways of acting, students learn to act their way into seeing the world more clearly (wisdom) and feeling it more truly (compassion).

### Positively Reinventing Systems

These four shifts suggest one way that an international education might respond to a planet in peril. The stakes could not be higher. This generation will need to learn not only how to live more humanely and sustainably on an *individual* level. But virtually every urban system will require reinvention—land-use and transportation,

architecture and building, energy provision and food production, water management, and waste cycling. The next 40 years, predicts Stanford historian Ian Morris, will be the most important in all human history.

International education can best serve the “Great Work” by doing what it does best: opening students’ minds to the distinctive genius of foreign thinking and living. World cultures are living libraries, repositories of the human legacy and potential. Some, especially within Western nations, showcase the hyper-modern prowess of economic and

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