



May 2021

Co-Creative Classrooms

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

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"Your sons and your daughters/Are beyond your command" — Bob Dylan

Thank you for this fascinating discussion. I am happy to share my "nitty-gritty experiences" with a program empowering higher education students to self-organize for transformative learning.

We know formal education is entrenched in "old school" practices and power relations that defend the status quo. Universities are built for transmitting knowledge at the service of a separatist, neoliberal ideology with little space for reflection or societal responsiveness. As higher education pursues cultural reproduction, its dominant pedagogy is that of "depositing" knowledge in students, framing the future as an "improved" extrapolation of the past. This model ignores not only the imminent collapse of the extractive system but also regenerative alternatives emerging worldwide.

Many programs in "sustainability" education remain marginal (a new specialism, reaching only a small group of already motivated learners), superficial, or counterproductive (promising "green growth" and making continued extraction seem sustainable). They often focus on technological (ecomodernist) solutions rather than on holistic system shifts, social justice, decolonization, or post-development reflections. They mostly stick to a "depository" pedagogy, transmitting knowledge about what is wrong and what ought to change, without empowering students to become activists for an ecocentric civilization. Many students experience these courses as "depressing" as they offer no space for dealing with emotions, grieving for a dying world(view), or inspiring hope. More radical and "activist" education initiatives emerge in civil society organizations (e.g., Ecoversities or Gaia Education) or novel educational institutions (such as

Schumacher College) *outside* established institutions, and therefore with limited impact on mainstream education.

Since we have only a few years left to change course, we need to find faster ways for all young people to learn that healthier and more just pathways are emerging, and to motivate and empower them to “unlearn” the extractive/destructive lifestyle. Current youth movements (like Fridays for Future) show that young people are well-informed, motivated, and connected; they are capable of organizing and making themselves heard by people in power. Over the last two years, I ran a small extracurricular program building on this capacity of young people to self-organize. Rather than fighting for curriculum reform (too slow), we set up trajectories of mutual learning in teams of students from various disciplines (ranging from BA to PhD-level), using emerging regenerative practices outside of academia as (transdisciplinary) “classrooms.” Through literature, games, exercises, and documentaries, they learn about complexity, systems thinking, and ecocentrism; they then work on an assignment involving a vision of a new future. As their coach, I told them that I had to learn as much from them as they could learn from me. The program takes one year, with four hours weekly of meetings and homework (e.g., reading or watching documentaries). After the first year, the students agreed that this program changed their outlook on life and empowered them to contribute to societal change.¹ Two of last year’s graduates now coach a new team of learners, which shows the scalability of this approach.

During the first year, the assignment was to write a “Young Persons’ Guide to the Future” (YPGF), presented as a variation on, say, the *Lonely Planet Guide to Mongolia*: it describes the Future World—framed as “breaking away from the destructive course of the present”—while starting with a chapter of the travel guide they choose (e.g., how you eat there, how you move around, what money is used, how work is organized, what the landscape looks like, etc.). They understand the chapters are interconnected (if, e.g., food is produced locally and agro-ecologically, that has an impact on the landscape, transport, etc.). Moreover, the YPGF is “probabilistic”: it does not describe what you will or must experience (producing “predictions” or “science-based solutions”), but lets you envision what you may experience if you take that pathway. Moreover, it is based on empirical input (i.e., immersive activities or field visits to regenerative initiatives, agroecology, community currencies, etc.) while remaining open to constant revision (just like a hotel described

in a travel guide may have closed down or a new museum may have opened). The metaphor of the travel guide proved useful to frame the complexity of the learning and avoid the pitfalls of linear thinking.

The second year's team (coached by last year's graduates) decided to work on the topic of higher education, and the assignment they chose for themselves was to develop a game allowing players to experience the power of transdisciplinary learning. They have consulted me a couple of times only, mainly to get access to my network of contacts in regenerative initiatives. I also helped them to understand money is a social construct open to change, which (using decentralized technologies like Blockchain) can be governed by communities.² Their enthusiasm, creativity, and profound understanding of complex issues fill me with hope and gratitude. They convinced me that—given the right learning framework and mentoring—we can trust young people to co-create a radically novel understanding of the world and govern their own learning activities for the great transition.

After the first year, we evaluated the program, trying to understand more in detail how its various building blocks contribute to its outcomes.³ In the coming months, we will also evaluate the learning experiences of the second year's team. Hopefully, some of the new graduates will be willing to coach a new group next year. At the university where I launched this project (as a volunteer), this extracurricular program is recognized as an Honors Program (worth 6 ECTS, or academic credits) and is valorized by the Doctoral Schools. Most participants, however, are intrinsically motivated: they are not in it for the credits. For some PhD researchers, the Doctoral Schools' recognition helped to overcome objections from supervisors who consider this a waste of time. This shows that institutional support helps to make this learning accessible to all students. However, it also creates administrative bottlenecks. The COVID pandemic forced us to work mainly online (using apps like Zoom or Teams for meetings and MIRO for co-creation), so theoretically this program could go viral in a couple of years, reaching a critical mass of learners that can then put pressure on their professors.

The collapse of the current system might cause a lot of suffering; nevertheless, in a forest, the dying of a dominant tree creates an open space where new life can emerge, nurtured by the deadwood. Education is not about "sustaining" the sick tree, but about learning to tend the new, still fragile ecosystem. Students can be wonderful gardeners if we let them.

Endnotes

1. Louise Grancietelli et al., "Unlearning Human-centrism: A Bumpy Road," *Ecological Citizen* 4 (2020): 11-13.
2. Anne Snick, "Embedding Social Finance as a Paradigm for the Anthropocene," in *Innovations in Social Finance: Transitioning Beyond Economic Value*, eds. Thomas Walker et al. (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).
3. Inge Smeers et al., "Co-creating a Young Person's Guide to a Sustainable Future," *Transdisciplinary Insights* 4 (2020): 25-47.

About the Author



Anne Snick is an independent researcher at the cooperative Smart.be. In her years in academia, she engaged in fieldwork and transdisciplinary research in gender, poverty, and social economy. Her current projects concern sustainable higher education and sustainable finance. She has authored several peer-reviewed publications, serves the community through public speaking and workshops, and is engaged with organizations promoting social justice and sustainability. She is a Fellow of the World Academy of Art & Science and Associate member of the Club of Rome. She holds a PhD in Philosophy of Education at KU Leuven, Belgium.

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Cite as Anne Snick, “Co-Creative Classrooms,” contribution to GTI Forum “The Pedagogy of Transition,” *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/pedagogy-transition-snick>.

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