



## **Bem Le Hunte**

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# A CURRICULUM FOR BEING

*Bem Le Hunte*

## Abstract

Universities are good at dividing up disciplines, to offer predictable career paths to students. In 2014 I was given the privilege of leading the world's first transdisciplinary degree, The Bachelor of Creative Intelligence and Innovation, which has gone on to become perhaps the most awarded program in Australia, if not the world. It teaches a future-facing curriculum focusing on future-oriented, industry-engaged curriculum encompassing high-level creative and critical thinking, invention, complexity, innovation, futures thinking, entrepreneurship, and social impact. In a commercial world where education has to prove its worth, there is a lot more at stake than educating for future jobs. We are educating for transformation, because unless we have transformed humans who understand radical collaboration across all our fields and professions, we don't stand a chance of transforming the world around us and rising to the challenges of our times.

## Keywords

*Being, transformation, transdisciplinarity, spirituality, inclusive design*

## Context

How do we design for all disciplines in a university system rife with competing faculty fiefdoms and fields, all of which operate in silos?

**How do we stop categorising knowledges, and the problems of today, as discrete, isolated fields failing to see knowledge and the complex challenges we face today as a connected holistic system? And how on this earth did we get to this time and place where we had to divide our disciplines in order to 'sell' them as predictable careers and think of our students as consumers?**

**On some level I get it. I completely understand why we can't include all our disciplines in a single melting pot and design for all our fields in an inclusive way and fill our students' heads up with kaleidoscopic, never-ending knowledge. After all, expertise in a specific discipline is vital, right? Who would want to get into an aeroplane if we stopped teaching aeronautical engineering? Or go to see a doctor if we stopped teaching medicine?**

**Back in 2014 I was given the privilege of leading the world's first transdisciplinary degree which combined students from eighteen different disciplines, now twenty-six disciplines, in a radically ambitious mission to bring together all knowledges, past, present and future in a new discipline, creative intelligence, that would simultaneously have to transcend all disciplines. I'd grown up in India, and I'm half Indian, and I'm also a novelist, so I very quickly started putting my culture and story to work on this gargantuan task. I searched for metaphors for junctures of knowledges and immediately landed on the holy towns in India which celebrate the confluences of holy rivers with temples and make these points of confluence sacred spaces for pilgrimage, self-discovery, and connectedness. This thing called transdisciplinarity would have to celebrate diversity and unity, and would have to make our university**

**'whole' again. Of course! And in making it whole, it might even make it holy again, although not in the way it was before, where theologians and philosophers went to university to argue how many angels danced on the heads of pins. What's more, this attempt to unify all our disciplines had to be 'wholy' beyond creed, discipline or individual. It had to be radically inclusive, including all humans as well as non-human others in our field of study. Yes, suddenly, all my cultural knowledges came into play, creating enlivened possibilities in a way I'd never been able to imagine before in the western academy, this place that privileges scientific Newtonian, objectifiable, rational, repeatable knowledge. I had to broaden the way I thought about knowledge, so it expanded beyond any border of every synapse in my brain and never again needed a passport. And it helped I had been a lifetime meditator. The best way of understanding transdisciplinarity for me came through the cultural lens of *Brahman*, the concept of wholeness and one-ness of consciousness and creation, the idea that I-ness and you-ness is a singular conscious whole. If this was the case, then all our disciplines were roots of the same tree. So, the task of inclusive transdisciplinarity design became something of a spiritual exercise in more ways than I could possibly imagine. It transformed my life and continues to transform the lives of our students to this day.**

**How did we get to this era of specialisation where we could think of humans as doing only a single discipline, doing only a single thing well, and repetitively, for the rest of their lives?**

**Our universities are good at dividing up our disciplines, possibly because it makes them easier to market. In dividing up the**

disciplines, our system also divides students into types. You're caring, line up over there and become a nurse. You're a go-getter, you line up over there and study Business. You're a high achiever, go study Law, even though we're educating far more lawyers than there are jobs in law firms. If you're a student within this system, your world begins to shrink. Yet a spiritually enlivened 'wholy' education should expand us in a transformative way, so we can never shrink back into a singular domain, a discrete corner, an incomplete being in a box labelled 'expertise in x,y,z.'

Because the university system was so good at packaging its disciplines and selling its wares, I knew I had to be equally good at 'selling' the idea of an undivided curriculum and undivided Being. I had to learn to flog the idea of being whole, whilst keeping the exquisite holiness more discrete, more discoverable, more personal. A spiritual experience for students who chose to go there. I evolved a language to sell this thing called transdisciplinary, or unity consciousness as I began calling it in more private circles, sitting as it was within the Bachelor of Creative Intelligence and Innovation (BCII) at the University of Technology Sydney. And I came up with four reasons why students should do this transdisciplinary degree that were rational, persuasive, evidence-based arguments for 'wholiness'.

Firstly, I started studying complexity and soon discovered 'super complexity' and this idea our students today will be exploring 'radically unknowable' futures. If ever we thought we were preparing our kids for the world as we knew it, we had to think again. With no stable past ground to stand on and no flat horizon in

the future to visualise, what use was it to simply teach students only a single domain of knowledge? I was inspired by the work of Ronald Barnett, a radical intellectual in my mind and inspired educational philosopher, who wrote about the importance of focussing on ontology, 'Being' rather than epistemology 'knowing'. This language spoke to the spiritual educator inside of me and the deep cultural knowledge I hold. I was always led to understand there were multiple knowledges and only one 'Knower' in my tradition, so it was far more important to focus on the Knower than the knowledges. This was the way to create cohesion in a transdisciplinary curriculum and empowerment and agency in the learner. This was a way to design a curriculum for all. It didn't matter whether students came from Engineering or Science or Health or Design or Communications or Business or Law. No matter which faculty the students came from, they brought with them their Knower or sense-maker. This idea of the Knower presented a unified field of consciousness in the transdisciplinary classroom. A way to engage our learners at depth in a meaningful way to identify their similarities as well as their differences. For me, this idea of an inclusive transdisciplinary classroom also brought to life the idea of a Uni-versity in its classical sense. A place to explore the universal confluences of knowledge, as well as the diversity of our disciplines. Another spiritual hero for me, Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo, came to mind with his statement, *in this harmony between our unity and diversity lies the secret of life*. The spiritual agenda became the secret sauce of the degree, and some of the students who understood this travelled light years ahead, powered by this notion. I started speaking and writing about the golden thread of the BCII narrative more openly and defined it as a 'Curriculum for Being', not just knowing. It was perfectly

**legitimate. After all, how could you teach a curriculum of knowing at any depth to twenty-six different disciplines?**

**Secondly, as I continued my journey of leading this transdisciplinary degree, I quickly understood all of our major global challenges are more connected and porous than any one of us can possibly understand, so we needed wholeness in our education system to produce future sense-makers who could see, feel, touch, and imagine the connectedness of all things, human with non-human, across our political, economic, social, technological, legal and ecological systems. This required a revolution in awareness. I had too many 'everything, everywhere, all at once' moments to describe these epiphanies during the course of leading this program, but no moment better than the arrival of our dear friend and teacher, COVID, who didn't present herself solely as a health challenge or a communications challenge or a business challenge or a design challenge or a legal challenge or a political challenge. COVID was all of these and much more. She was a teacher sent in the spirit of *Brahman*, clothed in complexity, and lifting up the urn of transdisciplinarity as an offering. I set her mission as an assessment challenge in one of the subjects I ran. Never had the need for transdisciplinarity been so revealed, landing as it did in all our backyards. Couldn't others see this visitation from their towers in universities around the globe? And if so, why weren't they acting on the knowledge?**

**Thirdly, a Curriculum for Being that focuses on the Knower not the knowledges would be fuelled by the fact knowledges were more transitional now than ever. The metaphor for me was the Great**

Library of Alexandria. It was a metaphor which played out on a less mythic proportion when one of our leading professors in Biochemistry said he was sitting in first year 101 classes to discover the incredible changes in knowledge in a field he had helped to pioneer. Just when I was ruminating on the problem of knowledge, I came across so many stories like this. For example, Elizabeth Newton's *Curse of Knowledge*, look this up, it's a great example, and the story told in the film, *Most Likely to Succeed*, about an experiment involving a group of students in an American College, all of whom graduated with a B average. When they were brought back a few months later to sit the same exams, without having time to revise, the average grade was an F. With the Internet, knowledge with a small 'k' had become more transitory than ever, and if it wasn't outdated or contested in this new world, it was quickly forgotten. So, in a transdisciplinary curriculum it made utter sense to focus on Being not just knowing. The timeless not the temporal, and the inner, not just the outer world. After all, knowledges come and go, but the Knower remains the same throughout a lifetime. As a way of focussing on the Knower I designed a process known as 'Ignorance Mapping' based on the work of Anne Kerwin and her *Curriculum for Medical Ignorance*. If we couldn't rely on knowing, and if our knowing was just a drop in the ocean, wouldn't it be better to focus on our ignorance and the art of discovery? This understanding of the power of ignorance and the beginner's mindset became a revelatory threshold moment for our students.

Fourthly, the argument for a Curriculum for Being became even more apparent in research in Australia from the Foundation for Young Australians, in a report claiming today's graduate is likely to have



**seventeen jobs across five completely different fields. Focussing on a Curriculum for Being became a necessity and I framed it around the need to 'future proof' our degrees. So, today's graduate in Health may become a midwife, do a PhD and transition into Education before being poached by Government and transitioning into Policy, only to transition into Film when one of their books becomes a bestseller, and then take to Agriculture, working on a farm they bought before they retire. You get the idea. If a career required so many transitions, including into fields and jobs yet to be invented, wouldn't a focus on Being be more enduring?**

**The Bachelor of Creative Intelligence and Innovation has gone on to become perhaps the most awarded program in Australia, if not the world. It teaches a future-facing curriculum focusing on future-oriented, industry-engaged curriculum that encompasses high-level creative and critical thinking, invention, complexity, innovation, futures thinking, entrepreneurship and social impact. It takes transdisciplinarity as a practice transcending disciplines and fields to promote discovery across, between and beyond all our disciplines. It has become a daily practice of inclusive design at the radical edges, a practice that does not exclude any type of disciplinary knowledge, field, culture or stakeholder. In other words, this exercise in 'wholiness', with the Curriculum for Being as its golden thread, has proved its worth. Students enjoy a 93 percent employment rate and over 40 percent of students are employed by one of the eight-hundred-plus industry, community, and government partners who support the program in an inclusive innovation ecosystem.**

**But even more significantly, the BCII has radicalised the way students learn and develop as whole beings. The transformative nature of a Curriculum for Being has been written about elsewhere, but the story is re-told every year through letters from students who report this program has changed their lives. In a commercial world where education has to prove its worth, there is a lot more at stake than educating for future jobs. We are educating for transformation, because unless we have transformed humans who understand radical collaboration across all our fields and professions, we don't stand a chance of transforming the world around us and rising to the challenges of our times. What's more, we're running out of time...**

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