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A New Agenda for Higher Ed Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

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The question for those of us in the business of thinking, propagating ideas, and equipping youth for lives in a confusing and uncertain world is what do we do? Living in the shadows or the sunlight of our legacy, what would our great-great-grandchildren wish us to have done?

Likely, they would ask us to overcome our blindness to what is right before our eyes: heat, storms, fires, floods, desecrated lands, extinctions, and injustices and what these portend for their lives. Perhaps, they would ask us to reckon with the possibility that “our ideas are too puny for our circumstances,” and to think more broadly and wisely about what it means to be human.¹ They would surely demand that we stop using the atmosphere as a dump and that we preserve Earth’s forests, rivers, soils, seas, mountains, lifeforms, and grasslands. Certainly, they would ask us to enlarge the democratic vista to include them, their great-great-grandchildren, and other species—an intergenerational, interspecies democracy of sorts. They would expect us to have created a durable foundation of well-considered personal rights and duties, tolerance for differences and dissent, and the wherewithal for truth and reconciliation.

For reasons that [Stephen Sterling](#) and others explain, the university as presently conceived is an unlikely source of remedy. It is committed not to transformation, great or otherwise, but more often than not to patching up flaws in the modern paradigm on the wager that it carries the seeds of its own repair and renewal. The educational system with millions of students each year, billions of dollars of research funding, and trillions in capital assets operates with the assurance that goes with its assumed monopoly of solutions to what ails modern societies. It exists unmolested in the world of influence and money as long as it does not threaten the dominant culture and its underlying faith in economic growth and human domination of nature. Its

organization often impedes non-trivial conversations across disciplines. Its financial dependency limits serious reckoning with large ideas of justice, peace, interdependence, and ecology. It deals primarily in what E. F. Schumacher called “convergent problems,” not “divergent problems.” The former are linear and thereby amenable to scientific or technological solutions. The latter are more like dilemmas that are, by definition, unsolvable but avoidable with foresight. Increasingly, our basic problems are of the latter sort: they are divergent moral and political questions “refractory to mere logic and discursive reason.”² Too often, colleges and universities have become hives of “busy-work on a vast, almost incomprehensible scale,” and students graduate as careerists, not agents of transformation.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to envision a transformation to a more decent, inclusive, and durable world without universities and educational institutions at all levels stepping up to meet the largest challenges of our time. We need their leadership to repair public institutions and enlarge our vision of democracy. We need their help to restore respect for truth, facts, logic, data, and history. We need their creative powers to help recalibrate failing institutions, constitutions, and economies with the way Earth works as a physical system. We need their example as models of solar-powered, ecologically designed communities. We need their help to equip the young to be citizens in a civic community and in an ecological order—a generation of “radical professionals” competent dual citizens with purpose, stamina, and vision.³ We need their convening power to bring diverse peoples together to forge a new and larger vision of democracy here and elsewhere. We need their help to imagine a non-violent world, one free of nuclear weapons. We need educators and educational institutions that nurture a profound yet practical awareness of our interrelatedness in the evolving enterprise of life.

The repair and renewal of educational institutions, however, will require a more critical assessment of education that keeps in the mind following:

- Ecological disorder reflects a prior disorder in the way we think and what we think about;
- Humans are fast thinkers but slow learners;
- It is possible to educate someone beyond their level of comprehension;

- Not all knowledge is good, and not all of it can be deployed responsibly in a world of feedback loops, leads and lags, surprises, and long time lapses between cause and effect;
- New knowledge is not necessarily better than old knowledge rediscovered, i.e., “slow knowledge.”¹⁴
- Formal education deals with half of the brain, dismisses the other half, and seldom engages the hands or heart; the result is often an “inverted cripple” with a single overdeveloped capacity;
- The planetary crisis cannot be attributed to the uneducated, but rather to the highly degreed, i.e., “itinerant professional vandals”;
- The goal is to cause no ugliness, human or ecological, somewhere else or at some later time;
- The important problems are those of education not those in education.

In the larger ecology of learning, situated on the periphery are many “alternative” small educational centers scattered around the world. They serve as important adjuncts to colleges and universities. They are not a substitute for formal education, but offer the opportunity for students, faculty, and others to step back and put things into a deeper and wider perspective and to sort the important from the trivial. Sterling mentions one such example: Schumacher College in Devon, UK. The College occupies an old carriage house on an estate that dates back to 1388. Named for the author of *Small is Beautiful*, Schumacher College concerns itself more with large questions than with answers. Typically, the questions posed in seminars and conversations at Schumacher are the divergent kind that challenge established paradigms and pomposity of any kind. The atmosphere is seldom as certain as in the higher reaches of the academic world. The scale is minuscule—several hundred students per year. Its speed is human-scaled. Its stock in trade is the kind of dependable old knowledge that has accumulated over many centuries. Daily routines at the College allow for serendipity and spontaneity. The focus is a kind of disciplined diversity and boundary-crossing thought. The program includes meditation, music, serious lectures, gardening, and walks along the Channel coastline that mimic geologic history. In other words, it is diverse but unified around the connection of body, mind, and soul. The College clientele is diverse. The classes in which I participated over the years included students of all

ages from all kinds of backgrounds from all over the world. Still, they typically bonded quickly into a supportive community in part because they work together to keep the place going. More important, at the periphery and removed from the mad bustle and busy-ness of their ordinary lives, participants have the time to sort trivial from the important and observe the world and themselves from a calmer and saner vantage point.

For students and facilitators alike, such experiences are rather like the effect of salt in stew: small by volume but large by effect changing the flavor of the mysterious thing called education. And, if we are to be truly drawn forth—the root meaning of the word education—we need such places and times to reconnect with our soul, the soil under our feet, and the Life all around us. In such places the “great transition” begins with a quiet transition in all of us as students.

Endnotes

1. William Barber, *State of American Democracy Conference*, Oberlin College, November 15, 2017.
2. E. F. Schumacher, *Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 128.
3. See Jeff Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 265–280.
4. Erwin Chargaff, “Knowledge Without Wisdom,” *Harpers*, May 1980, 41–48.

About the Author



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