

February 4, 2019

## Teaching four university courses — simultaneously!

“Donald,” said Marjorie, “why do you always have to do six things at once?”

“I’m a young man in a hurry,” I said.

“Exhausting for people around you,” she sighed.

I remembered that dialogue recently when I realized that my colleague Dr. Stepan Wood and I are actually teaching four university courses simultaneously.



Here at Cape Breton University in Sydney, Nova Scotia, it’s 1:30 in the afternoon, and I’m teaching a credit course — Political Science 3705 — which meets in person every week for 2½ hours in our smart classroom in Campus Centre. A continent away, in Vancouver, where it’s 9:30 AM, Stepan is

teaching a credit course — Law 391D — at the Allard School of Law at the University of British Columbia. During the first 1½ hours, our classrooms are linked electronically, and the two of us deliver four mini-lectures and discussions, rich in audio-visual materials, blending the stories from my environmental writing and film-making with the legal perspectives of one of Canada’s leading environmental law scholars.

For the final hour of the session, I meet only with the CBU credit students — half of whom are participating electronically. Each student will do a class presentation and a substantial reflective essay. From the CBU student’s perspective, this course — Green Rights: The Human Right to a Healthy World — is entirely a CBU course, delivered by Dr. Cameron in person, augmented by video guest lectures from Dr. Wood.

At UBC, meanwhile, a mirror image of the same thing is taking place: in the final hour of each session, Stepan is working only with his own students, who are all studying for law degrees. From their viewpoint, he is delivering a self-contained UBC course, augmented by electronic guest lectures from Dr. Cameron.



The UBC course, incidentally, is called Warrior Lawyers and Green Rights, and it's based on materials – interviews, films and a book – from [www.TheGreenInterview.com](http://www.TheGreenInterview.com), which gives Stepan a coherent and colourful set of stories that humanize the formal language of legal texts.

Neither of us could present such a rich experience alone – and the course(s) are further enriched by the virtual visits we've arranged with several of the people we're studying. We've already examined the work of David Boyd, the author and scholar who is now the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment – and he'll join us on February 6. A week later we'll be talking live with Marjan Minnesma of the Urgenda Foundation in the Netherlands, whose lawsuit forced the Dutch government to honour its own commitments to deal with climate change. Later we'll meet with Antonio Oposa from the Philippines and Anishinaabe legal scholar John Borrows. Our course is about the work of these people – and they'll be joining us live.

Two separate courses, enhanced by a set of shared lectures and visits. But there's more.

The shared lectures by themselves actually constitute two further CBU courses. Political Science 3705B is an online course for students who want a Certificate of Participation to enhance their resumes; each of them submits an assignment, and pays a \$75 fee to CBU. Political Science 3705A is for students who tune in online just to satisfy their own Curiosity. They pay no fee at all, and receive the course as a public service from CBU.

Because all the sessions are recorded and posted on the CBU website, Curiosity students can register as late as they wish, and catch up by watching the saved videos. Furthermore, Curiosity students can become Certificate students simply by re-registering, paying the fee and doing the assignments. Four sets of students, all satisfying their specific needs through a shared cyber-experience.

Is this the future of higher education? Part of the future, I think. The relentless blurring of disciplinary boundaries provides more and more impetus for collaborations like this. At the same time, the rapid interconnection of the human family through the internet provides us with opportunities to teach and learn together no matter who we are, or where we are located on the planet. And what students need from higher education ranges all the way from professional qualifications to intellectual growth just for the joy of it.

It's an exciting time in higher education, and I'm grateful to CBU for allowing me to be part of it.