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Author(s): Dr. Seema Arif

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Dr. Seema Arif

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Learning for Peace and Coexistence: Action Research to Improve Student Attitudes

Dr. Seema Arif¹

Department of Education, University of Management and Technology, Lahore

Abstract

Living in 21st century means living in a totally new world full of challenges both for the educators and the learners. The aim of a postmodern university is to enable human beings to live more meaningful and satisfying lives by promoting social justice, peace and harmony in the world. It can only be achieved by teaching students critical thinking or developing among students the capacity to look at problems from various perspectives and thus reduce the chances of conflict. Therefore, the aim of this study was to improve student's higher order thinking skills and attitude towards life and learning. For this purpose specific activities were designed for undergraduate students enrolled in the course 'Introduction to Psychology', so that they may become more aware of their cognitive processes, increase their perspective-taking, revisit their rational skills, and be able to establish new links with their society and culture. Innovations through visual media and psychological testing were introduced in four steps backed with formative assessment. Qualitative feedback was collected by the end of the course from the students about the course material, teaching methodology, and the innovations used describing how they personally relate to this experience. The results show that students like innovative technology used in the classroom and some even related to it as the most relevant and meaningful experience of their lives.

Keywords: participatory action research, emancipation, teaching with technology, innovation, peace & coexistence

1. Background

The purpose of this study was to provide education and not schooling to my students as well as to provide them a chance to learn and value critical thinking as an enabling and liberating process in life. Living in a world full of terror and extremism is wrought with confusion and misplaced identities. The world should be more peaceful place to live; therefore we need to challenge our own prejudiced assumptions about other races and religions. It has been felt that our students are disconnected, unconcerned, keep themselves distant and hesitate to take the challenge of addressing global issues in the most logical of ways; rather they tend to react to global events according to personal whims or hearsay. Life on earth not only demands our careful attention but wants compassionate understanding, care and concern in terms of active steps to restore its balance. Therefore, not only the students are in need to be aware of the practical importance and utility of discussing 'life' issues as essential part of the curriculum, it

¹ Dr Seema Arif can be reached at seema.arif@umt.edu.pk.

is obligatory for teachers as well to emancipate themselves from the increasing burden of pain and disappointment.

Ford² (2002) forewarns the humanity that “the world is on the verge of an ecological and social catastrophe...virtually unimaginable in its scope” and we need proper education and training of the youth to meet this challenge. For this purpose “a total restructuring of the modern university” may be required. Ford (2002) postulates that the only goal suiting higher education institutions for making the world a better place is to enable human beings understand meaningfulness and purposefulness of life. Only then people would be able to adopt more satisfying lifestyles promoting peace, coexistence and social justice. The modern university, however, operates through the nomothetic maxim that profits can be maximized to any limit and endless structural and monetary growth is a rational and desirable goal. It is very hard to challenge this utterly utilitarian and materialistic conception, where students and parents, the customers of the higher education are motivated by the fact how much one should be able to earn after acquiring a certain degree instead of thinking in the terms what value or service a person may offer to a community after qualifying for a certain degree.

It is hard to imagine that Ford’s “restructured” university will materialize change, abolishing artificial borders, which distance knowledge seekers and isolate knowledge seeking. Hence problem-based learning will flourish, making a human connect possible through teaching of human values and providing students the opportunity to seek and engage in learning activities and projects linked with local and global issues. Therefore, I perceived teaching the course ‘Introduction to Psychology’ as a challenge, where the business students even confronted the very concept of teaching psychology to them. Hence, I decided to improve students’ higher order thinking skills with the course because psychology is the science with the basic aim ‘to develop alternative perspectives’ to think.

The outlook developed by logical positivist thinkers of 20th century of looking forward for technical solutions of problem is again shifting (Smith, 2003) towards a human angle and social sciences are gaining popularity once again. The action researchers invite social scientists for especially indulging in in-depth qualitative studies of the problem they face as practitioners (Argyris et al., 1985; Schon, 1991; Kemmis & Smith, 2008). I personally appreciate scholars like Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) who are very strong advocate for change that will help people in critical reflection for decision making and creating personal value system to lead a useful life.

²The quotations of Ford are based upon review by Barbara Beigun Kaplan in Thought & Action, Winter 2004, p. 123f.

Learning for Peace and Coexistence

Today, it is very much feared by educators that if the university purposefully abandons the pragmatic and utilitarian related financial outcomes desired by students from the degrees obtained rather than the expected learning outcomes professed by the academia, the students will either simply choose to leave the university or they will enroll in professional training programs only with little or no exposure to humanities or other social sciences. Consequently a generation will be raised deficient in holistic perspective on life and sustainability issues (Kaplan, 2004).

Smith (2003), therefore, reminds us of the reform in the university curriculum in history proposed by Wilhelm von Humboldt, which had placed great emphasis on developing among students, the skills required for open critical inquiry under the guidance of a researching faculty, synonymous to developing social capital or a civil society and enabling the masses to participate in greater decision making. Living in Pakistan, a traditional society, where stereotype thinking and behavior is followed because of fear of punishment, opposition or rejection by the family or society one belongs to. In such a case merely giving reasons for changing behavior and indulging into rhetoric does not work with strongly held beliefs of students who are already adults. The change in such attitudes and beliefs require deep thinking and critical reflection.

Globally, some universities are ready to take the lead; they are more concerned about the learning needs of students and direction is set toward more efficient production of 'thinking and creative graduates' Johnston et al. (2011) claim that 'Design Thinking' is the most creative tool needed to work in a 21st century postmodern university. Following Fiscbach (2005), Johnston et al and associates recommend cross-disciplinary learning to promote creative and original thinking, team building for research and innovation, and cultivating a university wide culture favorable for imagination and collaboration.

A similar attempt has been made in this research to develop a renewed relationship of students with their lives in individual, social and spiritual terms. For me teaching of psychology to undergraduates at a business school is not merely introducing them with the principles of psychology to use at a workplace but learn to make personal meaning of life and be aware of all the internal and external forces that govern living and be able to adapt to them. Pham and Renshaw (2013) recommend teachers (especially Asian) to leave the burden of individualism aside and switch to construct knowledge collaboratively; this requires critical reflection on one's own practice, as well as learning an art of nurturing, mentoring and coaching others. Moreover, it is essential to conduct self-studies and document one's findings to disseminate to others (Samaras, Kayler, Rigsby, Weller and Wilcox, 2006). Thus, following Glasser (1999), teachers need to adopt a lead manager's role and learn to do power sharing with their students, be trustful, make them feel responsible, and teach them self-management. Similarly, the students need to internalize the art of collaboration to become co-creators of knowledge rather than simply become consumers of knowledge.

2. Methodology

The Approach: Action research is a valuable tool to gain access to “contexts, people, and knowledge” that would remain out of reach otherwise (Kidd and Kral, 2005). It is one of the most widely used qualitative research approach in the discipline of education especially in teaching learning environment, where a change is to be introduced (Nolen and Putten, 2007). Participatory action research (PAR) has been chosen as a research methodology because it has a discursive power (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, 2005; Somekh and Zeichner, 2009); PAR is meant to shape the social action in a particular community by the ‘regimes of truth’ which monitors and governs the select values and behaviors (Foucault 1972: 131). The action research process moves in a swift and smooth spiral allowing action (change, improvement) and research (understanding, knowledge) to emerge spontaneously and simultaneously (Suter, 2006).

Initially, Lewin and his colleagues used PAR methodology to experiment with social change; the purpose was to democratize industrial management processes, and helping communities to fight with religious, social and ethnic prejudice (Lewin, 1946). Hence, it can be used as an effective tool to create general public awareness against all kinds of biases and prejudices through self-reflection. Participatory action researchers also follow the tradition of Paulo Freire (1972) to promote the cause of social emancipation. Friere favors upgrading consciousness level by using the powerful combo of reflection plus action (Kemmis and Smith 2008; Gibbs, 2014). ‘Praxis’ is thus generated by combining theory (rational thinking) and practice (pragmatic action) to liberate oneself from those oppressive thought structures which hold people captive and enslaved for generation. Therefore, actions are mechanically repeated without knowing their ends. The purpose of PAR is to remove the duality of mind and body and involve oneself into purposeful spiral of theory and practice, reflection and action.

While working on such reflexive inquiries, I as researcher had chosen to adopt an emancipator role to disrupt oppressive practices, challenge prejudice and to initiate a critical dialogue for student transformation and empowerment (Postma, Spreen and Vally, 2015). It is hoped that this approach would emancipate students from any painful tradition followed aimlessly, causing self-deceptive and intimidating behaviors. Self-reflection and critical thinking will enable people to transform their social practices making them peaceful and tolerant societies and communities (Kemmis, 2006; Cain and Harris, 2013; Gibbs, 2014; Kayaoglu, 2015).

Innovative teaching and use of technology is the most recommended mantra to engage students in a higher education classroom (Mouasher and Lodge, 2016). Zhu and Engels (2014: 137) recommend “the integrated use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), the adoption of student-centered learning and the use of collaborative learning approaches for pedagogic success. Hence, action research was selected as the research methodology to experiment with the suggested innovations.

The Process: Action research is not merely a process of collection of information; it requires reflection at each step. Schön (1983) describes the reflective practitioner as one who thinks systematically about his/her practice. Here the challenge was tougher because change was directed at bringing a desired improvement in the attitude of students. The research was carried out during the Spring Semester, in four steps with seventy students of Bachelors in Business Administration (BBA) enrolled in a course ‘Introduction to Psychology’. The duration of the semester in the university is four months and comprises sixteen sessions of three hours per week. The first two activities were take home online psychological tests given as regular course-work assignments. The third activity, the movie “Children of Heaven” was run in a special show in the movie week and it was ensured that all students watched it. A reflective assignment on the movie was also given to note down student reactions, involvement, and engagement in the process. The fourth activity on the material religion was performed during the last session when regular coursework had been finished. Each activity was backed up with an informal formative assessment, the details of which are attached as appendices. The action spiral emerging out of the research is as follows:

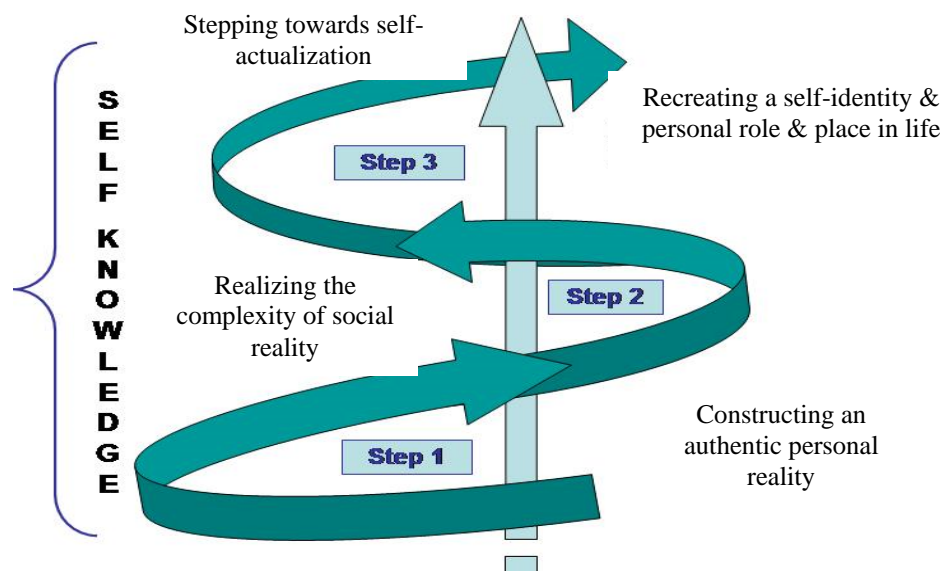


Figure 1. The Action Spiral

I have tried to move gradually in the spiral of our participatory action research where the first step was to introduce an exploratory change, second was to collect data, third was to actively reflect on it and the final step was to build more refined plans for change as suggested by McTaggart (1991: 175). All forms of inquiry including reading, introspection and logical deduction were used along with observation, discussion and report writing to notice real time change in attitudes and behaviors of the research participants, the undergraduate students of a business school. Due to time and resource

constraints, the data management was found to be really difficult. As suggested by Kock (1997) to simplify the information and to make it accessible, content analysis was performed on the available data to identify general trends and pattern of behaviors signifying change. The detail of steps taken is described in the following passages.

First Step: Use of visual media to brainstorm about people and situations

Gardner (1999) suggests that education is to be designed for understanding. The innovation used in the course was showing real life pictures to brainstorm. The purpose was to teach students how people react differently to the same stimulus and it is not odd to have a different opinion from others. Continuing with the exercise, I introduced them later to concept of cultural bias and stereotypes, how can people be easily mistaken about others by just looking at their attire, style of dressing etc. Similarly through the use of models and puzzles students were made to shift from concrete to abstract thinking and vice-versa. They also learned to apply newly learned principles on real life situations, while learning the principles of motivation, reinforcement planning and self-efficacy.

Second Step: Use of psychological tests to develop understanding of one's mental processes

I used two online psychological tests to help students understand our mental functioning; the first test was used in the beginning of the course, and the second near the end of the course.

- 1) The students had to know which half of their brain is more dominant, left or right, and they had to report what characteristics they found significant in them, and how did they plan to use these characteristics for their future success in personal and professional life. I was keenly interested to know how students reacted to scientific information. Did they accept it 'as it is' or challenge this information.
- 2) In the second test the students learned about their personality type according to Jung's typology, and Keirsey's Scale of temperament and determined how they could use this information in their career planning. I wanted students to check their pre-held beliefs about their selves and validate it against the scientific information. This testing also opened a gateway of self-discovery for students and many of them completed many other tests available on the internet and enthusiastically shared the results with me in the next classes. It was like breaking barriers of formal communication and developing a bond of trust.

Third Step: Movie 'Children of Heaven' to understand the dynamism and inner reality of a successful social life and accord of human relationships.

The movie was about children who shared single pair of shoes to go to school alternatively. It was based on the Eastern values of sharing and caring for family despite scarcity of resources and to remain happy and self-confident, never losing hope to strive honestly and faithfully for a better future. They had to write a critical review on the movie, comprising four questions demanding critical thinking and reflection. The questions were framed for individual answers reducing the chances of copying.

Fourth Step: The presentation on material religion to contemplate upon one's moral and religious identity.

Living in a world of confused identities is challenging, where most of the information creates divide among people, societies and cultures. I wanted my students to know the roots of their identity and rationalize why they are what they are. Therefore, I selected some aspects of material religion using pictures of sacred artifacts, symbols and architecture to check the belief system of the youth. It began with regular questions about daily practice of faith and evolved to check the higher order beliefs in the most neutral way possible. The students were also assured that in most questions there is no single correct answer and they could choose which seemed most relevant to them according to their personal belief structure. Statements were constructed in such a way that stereotyped answers could be avoided. At the same time some critical and novel responses were added which invited natural curiosity and stimulated inquiry as well as ensured involvement of the young students in the process as the theme ultimately evolved to conflict resolution among faiths and restoring global peace.

3. Findings

A 30 item feedback questionnaire was presented to the students to record their feedback freely, openly, in statements, symbols, emoticons, cartoons or drawings. The feedback questionnaire has been attached with the document as “Annexure A”. 67 out of 70 students have participated in the research feedback, which makes level of participation about 96%. (95.71). The frequency of the responses has been recorded and is attached with the document as “Annexure B” and “Annexure C”. “Annexure B”, has the student feedback about student learning and personal development, whereas, “Annexure C” graphically represents the student feedback about the course showing the frequency of chief responses. Many students have chosen to draw their experience on simple paper with pencil, representing their learning and signifying their relationship with me as course instructor. I have been able to lay foundation of long-term trusted relationship with my students; I may make the most of it.

Most of the students opined that the course was helpful; it helped them to think about various situations in alternate ways. It helped them to develop a fresh outlook on life and refreshed their relationships with their family. Most of them also agreed upon taking more humanities subjects in their curriculum; they were especially interested in comparative studies of religion and the reduction of interfaith conflicts among three

major Abrahamic religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism. However, they appreciated watching the movie, 'The Children of the Heaven' as the best part of the course. In most cases the students could relate to the problems of life and were ready to adopt a different perspective by gaining further knowledge on the subject; many of them discussed their personal issues and viewpoints with me in my office. They also showed interest and did original and creative assignments with interest. They were also able to raise critical questions about attitudes and certain processes; few could also suggest solutions. So it was felt by me that they have stepped on the journey of self-discovery using reflection and empathy. Few, however, remain resistant, unwilling to surrender to new knowledge.

It was quite an achievement with youth from a traditional orthodox society, who at the beginning of the course regarded psychology as irrelevant to their business studies and not having practical utility in their lives. The few who remained resilient towards change; they particularly did not want to learn about psycho-physiology of brain, emotions, motivation or to know about the details of thinking and learning process. It is unfortunate that people, even educated youth want to stick to traditions and common-sense beliefs and thus fail to develop a shared sense of meaning of life for community, country and nation or for humanity at large. Perhaps one course in a modular setting is too short a time to bring the desired change in all students. More time and effort is required for inculcating level of engagement, enthusiasm and hope for learning and achievement in students.

4. Discussion and Implications

According to the shared sense developed by the students, psychology as a science is very boring; it is quite hard to understand structures, models and theories of a psychology, however, human content makes it lively and interesting. The youth appreciates visual media and lively content that deals with real life issues, thus, the content of psychology course must frequently address real life issues rather than stating stereotyped examples from foreign cultures.

Participatory action research was found to be a very powerful medium for personal learning, both for the students and the teacher. PAR calls for engaging in the praxis of discovering new ways of thinking and acting, and learning by interacting with others. Three essential features of action research were emphasized in this research: it was participatory, self-reflective, and particularly focused on change in consciousness. The action in this research was aimed at changing the attitude of students and their behavior as well. Using action research methodology in an undergraduate psychology course equipped the students with the ability to cut off from routine solutions and actively look for alternate solutions. It gave the students the required drill to safely experiment with various ideas without any challenge to their self-esteem. This approach satisfactorily helped students to jump from single loop thinking to double loop thinking as suggested by (Argyris, Putnam and McLain Smith, 1985; Fullan and Hargreaves,

1991) thus liberate themselves from certain cultural biases and stereotypes, own their ideas and be confident to vocalize them in personal feedback. It was a big achievement in an orthodox traditional Pakistani society.

Corresponding to the philosophy of Carr and Kemmis, it is asserted that the purpose of emancipator research was achieved that is to emancipate the participants from tradition and controlling bureaucratic structures and to differentiate between education and schooling by paying close attention to the elements which are “contradictory and irrational” (1986, p. 204). With the help of this reflexive inquiry, the researcher was successful in developing partly the knowledge, values and competence of individual students for self-expression and refocusing their aim and purpose of life so that they can better participate in cultural, social and economic life of their respective communities (Kemmis, 2006; Cain and Harris, 2013; Gibbs, 2014; Kayaoglu, 2015).

Participatory Action research is all about celebrating the ‘Three Ds’, i.e., differences, diversity and human dignity (Hawkins, 2014; 2015). My understanding of participation is involvement and engagement of the students as participants of research while caring for the 3Ds. The aim is to respect prior knowledge as well as co-create new knowledge by providing a deep meaningful insight into one’s beliefs and inform one’s practice which is valuable and useful in the local context (Miller, Michael, Maguire, Noffke, and Sabhlok, 2011; Hawkins, 2015). I ensured that the whole process is embedded with ‘compassionate consciousness and facilitates open communicative spaces among the participants (Skolimowski 1995). My focus was to provide empathic understanding to each individual participant by providing a listening ear and create an open environment for discussion in a tolerant atmosphere.

5. Reflection

Some resistance to change was observed because people perceive that their previously held beliefs were being challenged. However, if we provide them with the chance to review their past making a connection with the present, they may decide to break up with the past, and willingly move their attention towards a better future. With all due respect the past could be now buried with appropriate honor and distinction. (Dick and Dalmau, 1990). The teacher’s job is to forget past actions and welcome new era of understanding and friendship. Much of student misbehavior and resistance in class was ignored and least punished.

The majority of human actions incur collectivism especially in a traditional society like Pakistan, where individuals cannot complete their tasks with their individual efforts. Collective human action needs collective decision making. Therefore, we need to design such decision making activities which are facilitative for initiating collective processes. It is easier to change the attitude of people when they observe that some members of their group have successfully adapted to change and are

satisfied with it. Similarly, if some prominent and intelligent students listen to you carefully and you can successfully engage them into action, the rest of the class would follow. But this group of students must be a good mix of active, dull and difficult students and not only nerds. Nerds are least copied in their social behavior, therefore, the target were the “socially intelligent” smart and active “hero type” community of the class.

Attaching rewards with actions and not with attitudes of the students also helps. Positive actions with proper reinforcement can bring positive change in attitudes as well. The use of negative reinforcement or punishment was not compulsively imposed upon the youth; it was avoided but inflicted where it was needed to maintain class discipline. In some cases it was used in most neutral of ways with prominent students, making the rule of discipline uniform and fair.

The teacher’s job is not to decide for students what to do, but invite them to action, either by observing someone in action and then critically reflecting on it (as in case of the movie Children of Heaven) or by thinking on various visual cues demanding action that what is to be done, moreover, providing them the opportunity to be vocal about their needs and beliefs and share it with their friends and classmates before finally choosing the action for themselves. I found that it removes hesitation and brings out the best among students.

6. Critical reflection

Scholars recommend that people may learn through collective or individual action to choose wisely among better regimen for future. People unlearn and relearn, they remain calm in face of adversity, and they struggle against coercion (unwanted, unplanned, regressive or unjust change). How we may learn to act or react, survive and struggle, we must learn to appreciate diversity, be it religious, racial or ethnic, for coexisting in peace and harmony; only then we can give a sense of hope to our next generation (Pratt, 2005; Gibbs, 2014; Helskog, 2014). Creating a community of learners in a classroom is not a blue sky utopia; by giving recognition and respect to different beliefs and traditions, we can provide our learners the opportunity to reexamine reality and fly high to limitless horizon of ideas, freeing oneself from the shackles of unnecessary doubts and fears (Aas, 2014). Relationships in a community never remain static; they keep their positions dynamic, shifting from close intimacy, to a casual partner, or even a distant well-wisher. A teacher will never be afraid of exploiting such relationships and challenging them with potent ideas to keep knowledge and learning flowing (Aas, 2014; Gibbs, 2014; Wong, 2014).

The greatest pitfall of the modern day modular programs is that both the teachers and students are well aware of the short term relationship with each other. Some students prefer to live or periphery rather than being a part of the live cell in the classroom. It becomes debatable how much teacher effort is required to make each and

Learning for Peace and Coexistence

every student participant of the learning program give proper respect to individual aptitudes and interests and also care for time and resource constraints.

Teen agers are most apprehensive of the critical feedback they get of their responses, introducing right action and channelizing their thoughts means very close and sincere examination of their personal feelings. It is not possible, though, to take care of and respond positively to each and every individual, but there was a sincere attempt to remain neutral and respond most affectively to any thought which was creative, culturally and morally relevant and satisfied the interest of many of the students.

A trusted student-teacher relationship had helped to carry on the process and to maintain student interest and teacher authority. It is further advocated that keeping student participation alive and dynamic reduces resistance. The more students are involved in constructive discussions, planning and decision-making, the better would be the expectations of their involvement and lively participation to get things done. Thus, the students were very much involved in all designed activities and were motivated by the importance given to their ideas and value attached to their opinion. This faith brought best responses and genuine opinions because no fear of punishment was there. There was no wrong answer, consequently no loss of self-esteem, each and every individual opinion was worthy and was upheld with the same intentionality and sensibility. The use of innovation was served as a general “trial”, an adventure as an unusual activity and escape from routine lecture or assignment.

Reaching a consensus, arriving at some shared meaning of the texts is the objective of any modern classroom, but that goal does not seem that easy to reach as it seems easy to speak. Students pose themselves to be adults, egoistic about their beliefs and showing an active denial of the fact “they don’t know”, the most difficult statement to utter in a classroom, fearing teacher disapproval and peer ridicule. This situation is the most critical to handle for any teacher and invites a moment of self-reflection, therefore confronting such a situation means that a teacher must arrange for alternate strategies and new resources (in case of teaching and learning material) to influence an egalitarian community of learners for increased participation in the teaching and learning process (2002:17).

In the end I admit that planning for change, where to begin with it and how to conduct it, and bear the pressure of negative feedback and/or resilience is the real challenge for the researcher. I also realize the difficulties faced by the university administration, the deans and curriculum developers; due to certain time and resource constraints it is extremely difficult to offer a variety of interdisciplinary courses when the cost of higher education is increasing day by day. Thus, all we can do is to try inculcating the critical topics regarding social change into existing courses in a fashionable way using the art of customization and skillful tailoring. Teachers must demonstrate commitment to endow students’ minds and hearts with the value of peace

in life, the worth of all beings in nature, and an appreciation for the complex ecology of relationships that affect both life and living on earth as advocated by Ford (2002) and many others to develop a systemic view or holistic concept of life such as (Senge, 1999; Capra, 1999).

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