

“Sustainability challenges cannot be understood from just one perspective or just one discipline”

An interview with Dr. Maximilian Jungmann¹, Heidelberg University, about his interdisciplinary Marsilius Bridge Seminar “Sustainable Strategy Development”



HINT: Welcome, Dr. Max Jungmann! You are the Executive Manager of the Heidelberg Center for the Environment (HCE), Founder and CEO of the strategy consultancy ‘Momentum Novum’, which focuses on sustainability, and CEO of FALK Momentum, a joint venture between the financial auditing firm FALK and Momentum Novum. In the winter semester of 2023/24, you also taught a Marsilius Kolleg “Bridge Seminar” at Heidelberg University entitled ‘Sustainable Strategy Development’. As both the manager of an academic center and the CEO of a consultancy firm, how did you end up teaching a seminar at Heidelberg University? What was your motivation behind it?

Jungmann: I have actually been teaching quite a bit since I started my PhD. I like teaching because I really enjoy passing on what I have had the privilege to learn, as well as the experience that I have collected, so I have always had a passion for teaching. But my motivation for this specific seminar was to help students further understand what tools there are for strategy development in general. That is something where I saw the need to provide an offer at Heidelberg University and to combine this with the principles of sustainability. Because if we only focused on traditional strategy consulting, such as strategy development, which is what strategy consultancies do, that often contradicts the principles of sustainability. If, on the other hand, we only focus on sustainability work and sustainability strategies, but these are not integrated into a holistic perspective and approach on strategy development in general, then it will always be part of a niche; it will only apply to one specific area. But given the very limited time we have to address sustainability challenges and turn them into solutions, we really need to mainstream our approach, and we need to scale it up very quickly – hence the connection between strategy development and sustainability. That is why

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¹ Picture source: Florian Freundt

we called the seminar ‘Sustainable Strategy Development’ and not ‘Sustainability Strategy Development’.

HINT: I see. Are you speaking here as the executive manager of the Heidelberg Center for the Environment, as the CEO of the consultancy firm, or as someone else entirely?

Jungmann: I think it is a combination. The seminar is based on the experience I have collected with the consultancy, and the link I made through my own research and my work as the executive manager of the HCE connecting different research initiatives. With everything I do, there is a link between practice and theory, between knowledge and action. So it fits in perfectly.

HINT: These Marsilius Bridge Seminars are not like traditional seminars within a specific department. Why did you choose this frame for your seminar, rather than offering it as part of the general curriculum at the Institute for Political Science, for instance?

Jungmann: The Marsilius Kolleg at Heidelberg University seeks to foster exchange across departments and faculties, and the organizers asked us if we wanted to contribute to this exchange in the field of sustainability. Marsilius Kolleg Bridge Seminars are by definition interdisciplinary, hence the name: they are meant to build bridges between different

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departments. And the seminars have to be interdisciplinary in two ways: they have an interdisciplinary audience, which means students from different departmental backgrounds participate in the seminars. But they also require interdisciplinary teachers and lecturers, so they always have to be taught by instructors from at least two different disciplines. My own background is in Political Science. I did my PhD on climate

change and health at the intersection of global health and political science. And I taught the seminar together with Thomas Rausch, the Managing Director of the HCE. He is a biologist by training, so it was really enriching to have that interdisciplinary exchange between us instructors and then, even more so, between the students. Sustainability challenges, if we take them seriously, cannot be understood from just one perspective or just one discipline. That is why it was so important to us that we got to design the seminar in this way.

HINT: Sustainability itself seems like the current ‘hot topic’ in more than one sense, unfortunately. But given this need for multiple perspectives and disciplines you have just described, what kinds of students were attracted to the bridge seminar? For example, did you have sustainability activists with intrinsic motivation to create change? Or did students look for a class that would be important for their future careers and they were attracted to the

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strategy development part? Did students explicitly comment on the interdisciplinary approach?

Jungmann: We asked the students why they chose the seminar and, to be completely honest, many of them had attended one of our previous seminars, looked at who was offering the bridge seminar, and were motivated to learn more from us. But many of them also said that Heidelberg is lacking more business-oriented or organizational development-oriented offers. And they are right: we do not offer a business administration curriculum in Heidelberg. But lots of students need those business skills in their jobs and in their fields, even if they do not go into the private sector, and the curricular offer is limited with respect to more applied methods. To address that need, our seminar was very methods-oriented. For example, we helped students understand questions and apply skills such as: what is a double materiality analysis; how do you calculate a corporate carbon footprint; how do you perform a SWOT analysis; how do you develop strategies; how do you engage with stakeholders; and so on. It was really clear that the students wanted hands-on expertise with specific tools they could use in practice. Their degree programs, in order to provide them with a solid foundation in their field, are often quite theoretically focused, and so they also chose this particular seminar because they saw that, with the focus on strategy development, they could really use the concrete tools and skills they learned with us after graduating.

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HINT: It sounds like you identified a gap in the educational structure of Heidelberg University. We do not offer an MBA, for example. But this bridge seminar is a voluntary program and not a mandatory part of any curriculum. Do you think that is the right format for what you were offering? Or are you exploring the idea of turning it into a permanent, potentially mandatory seminar?

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Jungmann: That is a very political question, and I understand the arguments on both sides. My personal take is that the grand challenges we are facing right now are so severe that they will change the entire world as we know it. And if we are not equipped with the right tools to turn all of the knowledge we currently have into practice, then we

will not be able to protect ourselves. So, in regards to the content of the seminar, I think everyone should have at least a basic overview of the topic and the skills needed to turn sustainability challenges into opportunities. Do I think that everyone should have this? Yes. Do I think that it should be compulsory? I am not sure. Because I do not know if people would actually listen and learn if a class like this was mandatory.

HINT: You are right that it is a political question; thank you for your diplomatic answer. Heidelberg University’s credit profile is very focused on research-based learning for the betterment of society by equipping students with core competencies such as problem solving, the willingness to engage in transdisciplinary dialogue, and the ability to apply all the knowledge and all the practical skills they acquired during their studies to real-life problems. That is why it might be interesting to expand courses like yours across the whole university or to scale them in a way that would enable more than the current twenty students to participate.

Jungmann: For sure, yes. And we need more trained teachers in this field as well. We need to have a better exchange between theory and practice because very often, as researchers, we think that we already know what practice needs and we may end up doing research based on our own assumptions. But you quickly gain a different perspective when you speak to people on the ground, people who have to apply their knowledge and skills to real-life scenarios, who are grappling with real problems in ways that may not have occurred to us before, and who have to make decisions about issues that could affect many people’s lives. We need their input and feedback to fuel relevant research, and they need us to provide research-based information so they can apply that research in practice.

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HINT: You mentioned a need for more well-trained teachers. In educational staff development, we often hear from instructors that interdisciplinary teaching, or even transdisciplinary teaching, feels very challenging from a practical point of view because of the inherent heterogeneous makeup of interdisciplinary groups. You co-taught your course, so your own backgrounds as instructors were heterogeneous, and the two of you, as well as your students, are likely familiar with – and potentially socialized in – very different learning cultures. What were the challenges, from your point of view?

Jungmann: You are right, dealing with heterogeneous groups of students is extremely challenging. In fact, all of the work I do is extremely challenging for that exact reason. Many times, people do not understand each other or do not know how to talk to each other when they come from different backgrounds or were socialized differently academically. My role in these heterogeneous settings is often one of a translator: I help people communicate from one perspective to another, from one discipline to another, from practice to theory and vice versa. I have quite a bit of training in this area and I have learned to navigate these potentially challenging situations. That made it easier to set the appropriate tone for the

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seminar from the beginning, to set expectations, and to have clear communication about what students need to contribute themselves. We provided a framework for appropriate and respectful communication, took care that all of us always communicated within that framework, and made sure to reference and pass on our experience with this type of communication. As instructors, we were there to facilitate, but we were not teaching per se, at least not in the traditional sense that students sometimes expect. We were not just telling them “this is what the reality is”, or our interpretation of said reality. We wanted them to think for themselves and not just present them with facts that we had decided were important to know. But this kind of seminar is only successful if the students are willing to contribute and think, happy to engage respectfully with one another, and take on the challenge that such a class poses as well. Let me stress this explicitly: we

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motivated students, of course, you still need to provide the proper framework and help empower them so that they can learn what they want to learn.

HINT: I would like to spend a little more time on this point of students self-selecting into your seminar. Did you have a specific idea in your heads of the types of students you expected, or perhaps even hoped, would join the class? Sometimes what happens to instructors in these situations is that they create an ideal image, and then the reality turns out entirely differently. How was it for you? Did you plan your intended learning outcomes with specific students in mind? And did the expectation of heterogeneity, for example, match the reality?

Jungmann: To start with your last question: the group was very heterogeneous, especially in regards to the different academic disciplines represented. We had students from Political Science, Geography, Psychology, Law, Economics, History, even Biology, Physics, Math,

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were extremely fortunate with the students that we had, who were wonderful. And I would like to believe that it was by design: as we already talked about, the seminar was not mandatory, so the students who attended actively chose to do so. In a way, they self-selected. They knew what they were signing up for, and they wanted to be there. And because we had so many students who really wanted to learn more about the topic, they made it extremely easy to us. Nevertheless, even with the most mo-

the Health Sciences, and so on. Pretty much the whole spectrum of the university was represented. And yes, that wide spectrum of disciplines was what we were hoping for because we saw it as an opportunity for us as facilitators to learn from our students. And we got to learn quite a lot. The students brought in perspectives that we had not considered before and that helped us further develop the content and the structure of the class. During the first session, for example, we asked the students about their backgrounds and their expectations for the class. And because we did not think our initial ideas would be able to fulfill all of their stated expectations, we decided to revise our initial ideas, and we quickly changed the entire design of the course based on that initial feedback. We even changed a lot of the material covered in class to accommodate all students with their different backgrounds and interests so they could participate to their fullest potential.

Our general expectation, or hope, was that we would have students willing to engage in this journey that we knew would be challenging. We needed people that would at least be open to the idea of getting out of the ‘black box’ of their respective disciplines and were willing to take those disciplinary blinders off. We wanted students with the patience to work through problems or questions they did not understand, and with the ability to be comfortable with that discomfort of not understanding something, to learn to ask the right questions, to think critically, and to be constructive in their communication. I am happy to report that our hopes came true and it turned out perfectly. The students, across the board, challenged each other: they did not just accept what someone was saying, but reflected on and thought about it, and then the discussion would always have a positive, by which I mean constructive, turn. The students were very solution-oriented, and we felt so privileged to engage with such an active and thoughtful group.

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HINT: How wonderful that your actual experience of the class matched – or perhaps even exceeded – your expectations! We have heard a lot about the important role your students played in the success of the seminar and how you were able to attract such a capable group. I am now curious about the other side: how can we attract enthusiastic and qualified instructors to teach these kinds of seminars? I mentioned the problem of scalability before, but even if one of you is a biologist, we cannot just clone instructors like you. I am sure, however, that many qualified instructors exist. Based on your experience, what kinds of competencies would teachers need to teach courses like your bridge seminar?

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Jungmann: I have many thoughts on this topic, but I will try to keep it brief. Many different transformative skills are required for making courses like ours a success. As teachers, we need to have an understanding of these skills and, in a second step, we need to be able to translate them. So, on the one hand, we need to have a theoretical understanding of these skills, but we also need to be capable communicators. But I think the true problem lies not within the specific competencies instructors may be lacking, but rather with how they could acquire them. When I look at the way that university teachers are trained – as opposed to high school teachers, who receive a lot of training in pedagogy, didactics, and actual teaching – the support universities offer their own instructors seems very, very limited. The kind of training you get as a university teacher is mostly based on experience. You watch other successful instructors and try to learn from them, or you may talk to your colleagues about what has or has not worked for them. But all too often, there is no mandatory training, or no training at all: at some point in your academic career, you are required to teach and just have to figure things out for yourself. Add to that the lack of recognition or reward for excellence in teaching as opposed to academic excellence, which forms the cornerstone of the whole university system. The assumption is that excellent researchers are already excellent teachers as well. To be fair, most universities have teaching centers, so you can get proactive if you need help. At Heidelberg University, you will find much support through heiSKILLS, for example. But this kind of training is not required, and lots of teachers have so little time due to various different expectations and roles they have to fulfill, especially at the junior level, that improving one’s teaching can become an afterthought. Plus, most universities still promote formats such as traditional lectures that pedagogical research has shown do not foster student learning, and so it is easy to slip into a mindset of “if I just

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explain this topic and reiterate it enough times, the students will learn it”, even though we know that is not how learning works. So, to answer your question, university teachers need, at the very least, a basic foundation in current pedagogical research and theories of learning in addition to practical training in didactics. You have to know that you need to cater to and employ different forms of learning in your courses, for example. In addition, I would say that most instructors need leadership skills – not just for teaching, but also for other roles such as mentoring PhD candidates. We really need to foster these skills in anyone occupying a leadership role, especially in academia, so that people also learn about important concepts and methods such as emotional and social intelligence, crisis communication, effective communication, psychological safety, and so on. We could go into hundreds of concepts that the majority of people who teach at a university or another institution may never have heard of. And that really needs to change.

HINT: Thank you for that passionate appeal for more teacher training at the university level; I see we have our work cut out for us. You mentioned diversifying one's teaching and employing different learning formats. Maybe you could give us a small glimpse into the kinds of teaching-learning activities you have used. You mentioned transformative skills and communication skills, for example, which are important within the framework of the Education for Sustainable Development alongside concepts such as participatory methods, active learning, and so on. What did you actually do in class to make it such a different learning experience from a regular seminar, which can still be very much teacher- or content-focused?

Jungmann: To be honest, I do not think there is one right or wrong approach to teaching. Everyone has their own style. I am a bit hesitant about pedagogical buzzwords, though: it does not make sense to me to use a concept or a method for its own sake, just because it is popular right now, if you do not identify with it or see it fulfill a certain didactic need. As an example, everyone was doing design thinking for a while or, in the business

world, everyone started talking about agile management and suddenly everything had to be done that way. That does not feel authentic to me. The method always needs to fit the situation, the target group, the potential learning goal, and, most importantly, your personality.

What feels authentic for me personally is balance: I always try to have a good balance between input that I provide, input that students provide, and interaction. In the beginning, I usually provide a bit more input myself and give students examples of how they can research certain fields so that they can prepare their own input. Then we train them in discussion formats so that they do not just listen, but are able to ask smart questions, to criticize constructively, and to have peer-to-peer learning experiences. And then the most important part for me is usually when we add the interface where they actively get to do something, and that can be a big shift for students and something that is very different from their other classes. I have given seminars where we did simulations, for example, so that they would understand politics better. In the Marsilius Bridge Seminar, we did a strategy development

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process in which the students got to develop the sustainability strategy for the university. We chose this focus precisely because the exact same process was happening at the university at the same time, and I think it motivated the students because their learning process felt authentic and relevant to them. We even had the manager of the sustainability think tank join the seminar to learn what the students were thinking and vice versa, so

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a real-life exchange took place. And it was a great learning experience for the students to see the differences between the strategies and how the different groups approached it even though they were all equipped with similar methods.

HINT: We also have a student contribution about your seminar in this edition of HINT and I have actually spoken to some of your students, so I know they were enthusiastic and really loved the seminar. Do you have any sense of what they may have liked the most?

Jungmann: I think it was important to have a concrete product that students could identify with at the end. If you have the opportunity to develop something in a seminar and to have some sort of result, it can be highly gratifying for students. Of course it will never be perfect in the limited time that you have, and you can frame it that way from the beginning, but it still motivated the students quite a bit. I know you are asking about a strength, but I very much would like to improve on this point even more going forward. We realized at the end that we had planned too much information for the seminar and too little time for the strategy development. If we had had more time, the results would have been even more comprehensive. I still think it was a success, though: when you create something in the process of a class that students identify with, they will remember it later on quite clearly. The hope is that one day in the future, they will look back, remember the concrete product, and thus connect back with some of the methods that they used in the process of creation. That, to me, is what successful learning looks like.

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HINT: I think you have hit the nail on the head. They already came highly intrinsically motivated, but your students also told me that it was wonderful to feel competent, and that seems like an obvious aspect of authentic learning that further fueled their motivation. They really appreciated the class. Still, I have to ask: was there anything you would have liked to do better, especially since this is a topic close to your heart? You already mentioned that the timeframe, as well as the heterogeneity of the group, were a challenge. Anything else you would want to handle differently or avoid if you offered the seminar again?

Jungmann: That is a tough question. One thing I always find challenging is the planning. It is really important for these kinds of seminars to have a workshop format, but that format is a serious organizational struggle, from securing appropriate rooms to getting people together at a specific time. I am wondering if the seminar would work even better as a block

seminar. When it is organized as a regular seminar, the preliminary part is always reserved for introducing key concepts and gearing up toward the workshop. But the students only really start working together in earnest and develop their team spirit during the workshop phase. From an instructor's perspective, the workshop always seems to work better than the preliminary part. That is why I would want to think about different formats, to see if we can design the class in a smarter fashion so that it flows more smoothly for its entirety. And while these particular students delivered, I think our expectations were too high and we would do well to lower them a little.

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And one more thing: I think we are running up against a more general issue with organization here. My colleague and I were highly motivated to teach this course, but there need to be more people contributing overall. Course offerings like ours should not depend on a few people at the university who are willing to put in the extra time. We need a much broader approach, more learning from and across

different disciplines that we can harness. And that kind of approach requires two big shifts, in my view: One, the incentive structures need to change. Right now, it feels like we are working against the system in many ways. We are teaching these courses and investing our time and energy because we are so passionate about our material. But there is little to no reward. Or rather, the reward we get is the students – their interest, their passion for the material – and the students are who we are doing it for. But from a rational perspective, what we are doing is not very efficient. There is very little recognition or external reward. The second shift regards community. This kind of approach requires not only the right material and people who are willing to teach it to students, but an active community, with sparing partners to challenge ourselves, especially when we are working on a topic, as we are with sustainability, that is at the forefront of current academic and public discourse. But we also know that the discourse can shift quickly, and we need a mechanism to keep learning, and to keep learning fast, with each other and from each other so that we can translate our research into something we can help others learn.

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HINT: You have just mentioned the need for community and for more people to get involved. When our readers read the interview, they will probably wonder if they could teach a similar seminar based on their own discipline or research interests. Any last dos and don'ts that people should consider?

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Jungmann: As for any class, ask yourself why you want to offer the seminar. Is it something you want to or have to do? Even if you have to do it, and you lack motivation, try to reframe it. Think about what excites you. What do you yourself want to learn more about? And if you have a choice: do not just focus on what you already know. Offer courses where you yourself can learn more and see it as an investment in yourself and the students at the same time. In addition, look outside of yourself and ask yourself what is needed for students and for society as a whole. I do not want to get too philosophical, but a concept that can help to make any life decision is the concept of Ikigai, the Japanese principle of finding purpose and living a happy and peaceful life. There is even a handy Venn diagram that can help you make decisions, if you want to look it up.

This interview was conducted by Petra Eggenesperger

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