If you could change education, what would you do?
If you could create your dream course, how would it look like?

These are questions we constantly ask ourselves at CEMUS. We actually have the opportunity to create your own, ‘dream course’. Course Coordinators, who are students hired to design and run Bachelor and Master’s level courses at CEMUS in collaboration with staff, researchers and colleagues, are asked already at the job interview: What would you change in the course?

Two coordinators for each course have a few months to plan and design the course, with support from CEMUS colleagues and a Course Working Group (See more about the model at: Transcending Boundaries).

This unique model was definitely what caught my eye when I was looking for Master’s programmes from the other side of the world – Japan. I knew no one in and nothing about Europe, let alone Sweden. Students hired to design and run a course – what would that look like? Could that model be working? I was skeptical. But extremely intrigued. I decided to apply for the Master’s programme in Sustainable Development at UU & SLU that was connected to CEMUS. Even if it wasn’t working perfectly, it’s an interesting idea. Could be worth getting an insider’s view.

After many applications, now I am a Course Coordinator, second year in.

Just finishing a very busy semester, and at the start of a new year, I’m going to choose to write about something I want to explore further in the future: empowerment. And relating that to one of the courses I coordinated.

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In Japan, I think people feel that things can’t change in society, whatever problem it may have. More so, it’s hard for people to see their role in
changing it either. People feel so disempowered. Maybe this is similar in other parts of the world too.

Cramming knowledge is still the dominant form of education in Japan, critical thinking is not valued, and hierarchy is prevalent in the classroom and in organizations. Coming from that perspective, the participatory and critical education that CEMUS practices, the democracy the organization strives internally, and the opportunity and responsibility it gives to student coordinators like me is, in short, groundbreaking.

After studying in the U.S. and Sweden, I feel that Japanese education is definitely not helping for people to feel empowered.

But what could be education that is empowering?

While coordinating the course Global Challenges and Sustainable Futures, perhaps it makes sense to say that empowerment was implicitly one guiding theme in designing the assignments and activities.

The semester starts with a ‘30 Day Challenge’, where students choose one thing to change in their everyday life to make it more sustainable and try it for 30 days. They present their outcome and experience in a creative format – posters, videos, comics, etc., and somewhat surprisingly, their stories are super positive and encouraging. I had a student challenge her own ‘shopaholic’ behavior, forbidding herself to buy new clothes for 30 days. She came out of the challenge saying that she felt better, liberated not feeling the need to keep up with the latest trends, and ‘actually felt satisfied with myself for once’.

During the semester, we have the different groups of students use half of each class to organize discussion activities called ‘Student-led Sessions’. In a sense, my colleague Alejandro Marcos Valls and I, coordinators of this course, had set up this course in the way we thought it would be the best course ever, and so we opened up for the students to use their turn to create the rest of the class. The students used different methods – quizzes, group discussions with various questions and themes, Fish Bowl discussions, etc. It was always fun for me to see what they come up with, and exciting to see sometimes otherwise quiet students being in the spotlight to lead the class.

The final group project that students work on for 7 weeks is perhaps what Alejandro and I put in the most effort to develop: Back from the Future We Want. Here we asked students to develop their ideas on: What is the future we want? and How do we get there? Our reflection of the Fall 2015 will be coming out as a chapter in Envisioning futures for environmental and sustainability education in February 2017.

What do you think? Do you think this fits what could be empowering education? Maybe I should catch one of the students that took this course and have them write about their experience.

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So this was just a sneak peak of what I’ve been working on recently, out of many other things I wanted to write about. (Maybe I’ll occupy another space for that another time.)

And maybe I’ll finish with one direction that CEMUS should work on more.

I just finished reading *Strangers in Their Own Land*, a book that explores the American conservative south. The author talks about exploring the other side of your ‘empathy wall’, in other words, people you don’t agree with, in the context of the widened political divide.

At a nation the other day, my partner and I were discussing with my colleague Lakin Anderson, who was the Course Coordinator for the course *The Global Economy* 2 years ago when we were taking the course. My partner was saying:

“In the Global Economy, I remember that lecturer who had a position that I totally didn’t agree with. And I really appreciated having that lecturer, since then I could really understand where he was coming from to get that perspective.”

In the era of social media where we tend to get information that you agree with and hang out increasingly with likeminded people, it is so easy to get into your ‘Echo Chamber’ of ideas.

But in this time, we need to stop ridiculing the voters of Trump or Brexit or Sweden Democrats, or whoever you don’t agree with, as ‘stupid’ or ‘uneducated’ or ‘racist’. How do we not lose and even develop a language to truly communicate with people we strongly disagree with?

As CEMUS strives to be a *meeting place* that transcends boundaries, the challenge is pressing and real. Let’s explore the other side of the Empathy Wall.

What would this sort of education look like?