

“I Didn’t Come Here to Think”

Are we designing graduates for performance or personal transformation in an AI-driven world?

The words of a first-year undergraduate business student, spoken halfway through a session designed to do exactly that. We had introduced them to the Ship of Theseus and asked whether they would be the same person leaving university as they are when they arrived. At the time, the awkward reaction felt like resistance, an attempt to disrupt the session, diverting it into giggles from the back or the room. On reflection, however, it felt more like a signal of an increasingly instrumental view of higher education, and perhaps also of what happens when students are asked to engage with unfamiliar ambiguity, where thinking is not always perceived as central to the student’s role.

In a system shaped by targets and metrics, it is easy for both students and academics to focus on KPIs and degree classifications. But what, exactly, are we designing our curricula to do? Increasingly, the answer appears to be performance, measurable outputs, rather than personal development.

Designing for performance

Across higher education, particularly in professionally orientated disciplines such as business and management there is increasing emphasis on employability, digital capability, and artificial intelligence. Curricula are being adapted to ensure students graduate with the skills required for an evolving labour market, often shaped by metrics such as graduate outcomes and student satisfaction.

This is both necessary and appropriate.

However, in responding to these pressures, we may be becoming highly effective at designing for performance; what students can demonstrate, produce, or achieve, while being less explicit about designing for personhood: who students are becoming. In broad disciplines where students often arrive without a clear sense of direction, this distinction becomes particularly significant, as programmes often function as spaces of identity formation and professional experimentation.

This tension reflects a wider shift in higher education towards measurable outputs and performativity, as Gert Biesta has argued in his work on the purpose of education. It raises important questions not only for teaching practice, but for programme design and institutional priorities. While this example comes from business education, the underlying tension is visible across higher education.

Reframing the first-year experience

One response to this challenge is to rethink what we prioritise in the first year, driven by concerns about how students make sense of themselves, uncertainty, and their future

direction within higher education. In one programme, this meant shifting the focus towards personal development, belonging, and self-efficacy alongside academic skills.

This involved introducing philosophical questions (such as the Ship of Theseus), ethical debates (including equity vs. equality), and structured reflection on values, goals, and purpose. Activities were delivered through personal tutors, creating space for dialogue, connection and reflection on their own development.

The aim was not to replace disciplinary learning, but to provide a foundation through which students could engage with it more reflectively, with greater self-awareness and capacity to work with uncertainty.

Initial responses were mixed. Some students questioned relevance; others engaged more deeply over time, often recognising value beyond their studies. Across cohorts, we observed signs of increased engagement, participation, and confidence, and indications that students were responding differently to the first-year experience.

Learning, discomfort, and uncertainty

A consistent feature of this approach was discomfort, although this did not always lead smoothly to growth. At times, students paused, resisted, or struggled to respond when faced with ambiguity.

Engaging with ambiguity, identity, and questions without clear answers, can unsettle students' assumptions about their competence, direction, and sense of self. In a learning environment often structured around clarity and assessment, this can feel unfamiliar.

Yet this discomfort may be where development occurs.

Education prepares students for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. However, pedagogy often simplifies and stabilises learning experiences, even when real-world contexts do not. As Ronald Barnett has argued, higher education increasingly operates within "supercomplexity," where uncertainty must be engaged with, not removed.

If we expect students to navigate uncertainty, should our pedagogy remain so certain?

AI and the changing nature of learning

The rapid development of AI adds urgency to this discussion.

If students can rely on AI for analysis, writing, and problem-solving, the value of higher education cannot rest solely on those outputs. Instead, it lies in how students engage, interpret, and apply knowledge. In this context, a model of higher education focused primarily on producing outputs begins to look increasingly fragile.

This reinforces the distinction between performance and personhood. While AI can augment what students produce, it cannot substitute for how they think, judge, or position themselves.

Qualities such as curiosity, judgement, resilience, and ethical awareness become key differentiators in an AI-shaped world. These are precisely the kinds of qualities that are cultivated when students are asked to engage with ambiguity, reflect on identity, and think beyond immediate performance. These are not easily reduced to discrete skills, but they are central to how graduates operate beyond university

Designing for becoming

Perhaps the most useful shift is simple. Instead of asking what students should know and do, we might also ask who they are becoming. This does not replace existing priorities but reframes them within a broader developmental context. It aligns with arguments that education should help students develop as independent, reflective individuals. For educators, this means integrating reflection, belonging, discomfort, and personal development withing disciplinary teaching.

A question for management education

The student who resisted the Ship of Theseus session may not have rejected thinking itself, but perhaps what it represents and how it challenged their expectations, certainty, or sense of how they were supposed to participate. If, over a degree, every part of a student is gradually replaced, their knowledge, skills, perspectives, and sense of self - then we might ask whether they are the same person who arrived.

If they are not, the question becomes unavoidable: are we intentionally designing that transformation, or are we so focused on what students can do that we have lost sight of who they are becoming?

In a system shaped by metrics, performance, and outcomes, it is possible to develop highly capable graduates. However, capability alone is not the same as development. Higher education should not simply produce more skilled individuals, it should develop graduates who are more reflective, self-aware, and capable of navigating complexity.

The Ship of Theseus is not simply a philosophical puzzle; it is a provocation. It asks whether higher education merely adds capabilities or deliberately reshapes the person who carries them. If students leave us unchanged in term of who they are, then we should question what it is we have contributed. If that transformation is not happening, then we need to ask whether our current approaches are sufficient.

The future of education may depend not only on what graduates know, or what they can do, but on who they have become.