




# Building New Bridges in Education

By Dr. Robert Kilroy






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The idea of a bridge has always served as a powerful model for education. As a concept it anchors the ideals of education in something less intangible, more achievable. According to UNESCO, the role of education is twofold: to empower individuals “to become active participants in the transformation of their societies”; to enable these individuals “to live together in a world characterized by diversity and pluralism.”<sup>1</sup> It is in this very real sense that education functions as a bridge. By promoting certain values and attitudes it opens dialogue and fosters relationships, allowing experiences to be shared, common concerns to be communicated and mutual recognition to be reached.

This role of education in building bridges between people and places has particular resonance in the UAE, which is celebrating 2019 as a year of tolerance. The analogy is also at the heart of a growing demand for executive education programs in the Gulf region. For professionals seeking to gain a competitive advantage in international business, a broad knowledge base and flexible skill set is essential. In traditional management education, ‘bridge building’ has become a specialized business strategy. The globalized nature of business environments means that individuals must now be able to cross “the cultural divide” through effective, contextualized communication techniques. With the rapid developments in technology, there is also an increasing need to overcome “the digital divide” through more advanced technical knowledge. In response to these demands, universities have had to adopt a ‘bridge building’ approach to education. Today’s complex problems require multi-faceted solutions. Multi/inter-disciplinary frameworks that allow students to supplement traditional skills with new tools have become the norm. It is in line with this model, for example, that universities are integrating digital business strategies into their established curricula.

In recent years, however, the challenges facing business professionals have become increasingly complex. The existing educational framework appears outmoded and ineffective because it no longer reflects the reality facing students in the 21st century. In August 2017, the Harvard Business Review released an issue entitled “The Truth about Globalization”, which details a retreat from a global, international outlook into localized markets and mentalities.<sup>2</sup> To navigate this new environment, a new set of skills is required. Basic knowledge of the global business world, an ability to bridge cultural boundaries, is no longer a sufficient response to today’s changing international climate. There is now a need for a deeper understanding of the complexities and contradictions of globalization, an awareness that bridges that bring proximity can also introduce distance and separation.

The same is true of the digital divide. The growing number of mental health complaints among students (discussed in the March edition of this magazine) suggests that the digital skills gap is more complex than first believed. Research now shows that technology and social media promote feelings of isolation and anxiety. In making the world more connected these platforms also cuts individuals adrift. As a bridge, they bring people together while also keeping them apart. Filling the digital skills gap is therefore no longer a simple question of acquiring new technical knowledge. What employers require, paradoxically, are improved social skills: versatility, social intelligence, self-awareness. With privacy concerns, data security and disinformation threats now the top corporate priorities, companies need individuals to analyze, and not just consume, technological data. Digital competences must come hand in hand with an ability to adopt a critical, disengaged position.



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To respond to these issues, the education sector needs to re-think how it employs the concept of a bridge in delivering knowledge. In light of the demands now placed on professionals, the traditional inter-disciplinary approach appears limited. In practice, the convergence of multiple viewpoints can lead to a narrowing of perspectives, as each discipline becomes more rooted in a particularized area of expertise. This model connects different fields but, in doing so, it also keeps them separate. How, then, can we adapt the notion of the bridge to address these challenges?

In Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, where the motto is "a bridge between civilizations", a new direction becomes possible. SUAD is unique in that it embodies the very ideals it represents. As a bridge between countries and cultures, it creates mobility and proximity between places and people. As a meeting point between Paris and Abu Dhabi, it connects a long-standing tradition in academic achievement with a commitment to innovation and excellence.

In SUAD, tolerance is not just an idea but an everyday reality. With a student body spanning over 80 nationalities, it is a symbol of the UAE's commitment to diversity and inter-cultural exchange. In this very practical sense, SUAD offers a new way of defining the role of education in the 21st century. By putting principles into practice, it forces us to re-think the bridge not as something connecting separate locations, but as the point where alternative perspectives are transformed into a single collective.

For these reasons, SUAD provides a hub for innovation in research and teaching practice. As a faculty member, I have spent the last two years exploring the possibilities of adapting curricula and methodology in line with a new concept of 'bridge building'. In my research, I am developing an alternative form of disciplinary exchange that moves beyond the limitations of the traditional approach. Rather than offer different modules in isolation (mutualisé),

this new approach maximizes the potential of the classroom as a space where separate fields directly overlap (à la croisée). The idea is not just to bridge fields that remain at a distance ("inter-disciplinarity") but to allow subjects to directly converge, in such a way that they are taught simultaneously (what I term "infra-disciplinarity"). At a practical level, traditional curricula are not simply supplemented with alternative approaches; instead, new tools and methods are acquired on the basis of pre-established knowledge.

I am currently implementing this model in an executive education program entitled "Business for English, English for Business". Building on the 'dual' status of the Bachelors degree in Applied Foreign Languages, the course combines knowledge in business related subjects (Marketing, Economics, Finance, etc) with the practical application of linguistic tools. Unlike other 'mixed majors', however, these areas are not studied separately but simultaneously, as two distinct but inter-connected perspectives. First, traditional business knowledge is used to develop more effective communication skills; next, these models of analysis allow for a more rigorous approach to business practices and a more acute level of technological awareness. In the process of deepening their knowledge, students acquire the tools needed to confront the real problems now facing professionals. For this digitally engaged, multi-tasking generation, the goal is not simply to look at a problem from different perspectives but to recognize how these different perspectives themselves overlap. This ability to shift quickly between alternative viewpoints creates a heightened level of critical (dis)engagement and, ultimately, a creative mindset more attune to the trends and opportunities that exist in the global economy. For this new generation of bridge builders, uncertainty becomes the source of possibility and the fear associated with risk is replaced by a courage to adapt, experiment and innovate. Only this type of entrepreneurial spirit, one that grasps the true complexities of building bridges, can rise to meet the challenges of today.



**Dr. Robert Kilroy**  
English Lecturer  
Applied Foreign Languages

Dr Robert Kilroy is an English Lecturer in the Applied Foreign Languages Department. He obtained a Master and PhD of Philosophy at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland and has over 13 years of teaching and research experience. His research interests include languages, linguistics, art history, visual culture and psychoanalysis.