

Transcript: Philosophy VIDEO 1.8 – Welcome to NUS!

The last video was on the theme of ‘why are we here?’ And I said, in brief:

So we can understand questions, so that we can understand science, so that we can understand creativity and inspiration, so that we can do well during our time at NUS.

But you might say: ok, sounds interesting—in a messy sort of way—but how are we going to get to that last item. Doing well at NUS. Being confused about the word ‘question’ doesn’t exactly seem like a recipe for tearing up the place with newfound genius.

That reminds me: I forgot to do this right at the start. Welcome to NUS! Some of you are new here, although most of you have already been here for a while.

You’ve figured out that universities are big and complicated. NUS: it’s chock full of faculties and schools. Bear with me while I give you a lightning tour.

There’s the Faculty of Arts&Social Sciences – FASS, for short - and the Faculty of Science. There’s Engineering, Law, Medicine, Design&Environment, Computing, Dentistry, Public Policy, Music. A couple others.

Below the level of faculties and schools there are more departments and divisions and programmes. As I mentioned, I’m a philosophy professor. I’m from FASS, so let me quickly show you round my home. FASS houses: Humanities, Social Sciences, Asian Studies and Languages. I’m not going to read you the whole darn catalogue, but, sticking again with my stuff: Philosophy is in the Humanities, as are History and English - that last one being itself subdivided into Language, Literature and Theatre Studies. There are 5 departments in Asian studies and 7 in Social Sciences. You want to know more? Go check the FASS website. (You don’t need me for this stuff.)

Hopping over to Science, there are seven departments: Biology, Chemistry, Pharmacy, Maths, Physics, Stats and Applied Probability.

Engineering—NUS’ biggest faculty, so I have read—has a bunch of departments or divisions: Bio, chemical, electrical, computer, industrial, materials science, couple others. Again, you don’t need me to read you a website.

Design and Environment: that’s three departments: architecture, building, real estate, and the division of industrial design.

I'll stop. Here's a question for you.

Why is this what a University is like?

Why just these divisions, these departments? What sense does it all make? How much sense does it make? Is there some other way the university could have grown up, been put together that would make more sense? Maybe WAY more sense? Is there stuff that's gotten stuffed into the university that, maybe, doesn't belong? Is there stuff that truly belongs but hasn't been included for no good reason? Suppose a magic unicorn gave you the magic power of rebuilding NUS completely from the ground up.

Because unicorn, you sudden can redraw or erase lines between divisions and departments, rebuild building and classrooms, rewrite rules for getting a degree. So: what would YOU do, if you were in charge of building the world's best university?

I know what you're probably thinking. Geez, Mr. Professor, why are you bothering me. I got no magic unicorn.

Fair enough. My point is this. The university as a whole is sort of like one big required General Education module. Even one big General Education Q Pillar module. NUS, come for the answers, stay for the questions.

It's natural for you not to question what you can't change, Then again, over the next four years, there's a sense in which each of you is going to build his or her own university, out of the bits and pieces of NUS you end up making use of, or not. Maybe if you think more about the university works—how it should work, ideally—you can make better choices for yourself.

I could make the point in miniature just by thinking about this module: we've got a philosopher, a physicist, an economist, a designer, a computer scientists and an engineer. But maybe on Earth-2 NUS' question pillar looks different. Maybe there's a theater studies professor, a political scientist, a biologist, a business professor and a psychologist. Obviously Q there is going to be very different. Maybe that would be a better module.

Sorry, you've gotta take the one we've got. But it's good to think of what might have been.

Without further ado, let me put forward a bold hypothesis about the reason the university is the way it is. Why these divisions? Why these subjects? It's because of

questions. Cue inspirational quote:

"What we observe is not nature in itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning." —Werner Heisenberg (1958)

I'll let that sit there on the screen for a few second. Actually think about it. Now let's finish the thought.

Therefore, maybe—weirdly—the only thing we can really get a direct handle on is not answers but questions themselves. The only nature we can truly grasp is not the nature of Nature but ... the nature of ... questions.

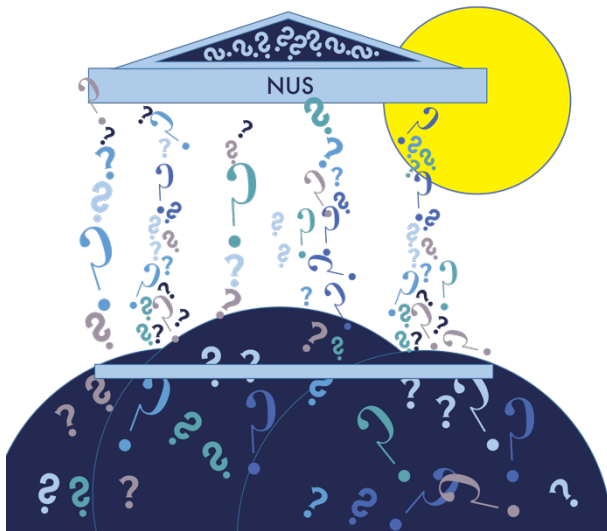
What a weird thought.

But he's a famous physicist. He's more famous than me and more famous than you. Maybe he's onto something. The University exists to study ... the universe. But when we study the university we don't see a polished mirror of the universe, like the university is some big telescope eye pointing out in all directions. What we see are a lot of discrete ways of asking questions, actually a lot of little people going into and out of a lot of different buildings. Did you read Richard Scarrey books when you were a kid. All those What Do People Do All Day books? Great books! In a weird sort of way this module is supposed to be Richard Scarrey for big kids: what do University People ask all day? And the reason we are treating you like a bunch of borderline babies, in need a children's book approach is ... maybe Heisenberg is right. I'll put that quote up there again

"What we observe is not nature in itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning." —Werner Heisenberg (1958)

So: what DO U people Q all day? Hypothesis:

Universities are made of questions. Any big pile of good questions is a candidate for inclusion in the university. And, to a first approximation, the divisions within the university correspond to different questions, or different kinds of questions, or different ways of asking questions.



If this hypothesis has merit, then maybe so does a secondary hypothesis, which will immediately divide in two. If universities are made of questions, then Q, a module about questioning, will serve two functions.

- 1) Q will give you an overview of the overall order of NUS. Or at least seeing these different professors will be a bit like taking a representative sample from several widely spaced points within the overall space of the University. If different disciplines ask different questions, or ask them differently, then hearing about how all that goes helps you make sense of these disciplines.
- 2) All this should help you figure out what stuff is for you, around this place.

Now I'm moving on to a second possible function for this module.

Suppose those people upstairs, who obviously like my t-shirts—I talked about that before—hire me to come up with a snappy catch-phrase for Q.

Q: Being Smart About Being Dumb.

Q Good at stuff to do with being bad at doing stuff.

Q: Effective Ignorance For Better Living.

Q: Being a dummy for Dummies.

You see where I'm going. Somewhere kind of paradoxical.

I already planted the seeds of the paradox with my first heading. I said the university is made of questions. Yet the university looks ... pretty solid. Solid physical plant, anyway. Buildings and classroom and piles and piles of equipment and books and on and on. How can something solid be made of ... questions? It doesn't sound like very solid construction material. Wouldn't it make more sense to build the university

out of ... oh, I don't know: answers. Aren't answers more solid and useful? The university is made of answers. What's so wrong with that?

Even if you didn't know I was a philosophy prof, you could probably guess how my deflection is going to run. Questions. Who needs em? Who needs to ask them?

Ignorant people, confused people. In short: people.

No one has all the answers or will. Know-it-all is not a professional qualification. (Of course you can fake it. But we don't teach that one. Try not to anyway.) Moving right along, what NUS hopes to provide, most of all, is don't-know know-how.

Answers are where we are always going, questioning is where it is always at.

To review the score: we have our primary hypothesis. The university is made of questions, divided up into different kinds of question zones, known as departments, programmes, majors, so forth. Running around the university are questioners, known as teachers and students.

And we have a secondary hypothesis: you can be a good student, and an all-around less-dumb human being, by studying questioning, the better to understand yourself, the university and ... the Universe.

I think that about covers it. Hypothetically.

But for now, let's take a break and play some cards. You like cards, right? I like cards.