Innovations in Thinking and Learning
Roger Martin – Roger Martin’s Example of Problem Solving using Integrative Thinking

STUDENT: Do you have any examples where you've used integrative thinking for a difficult problem in your life?

ROGER: I have. I had a perfectly fine career as a strategy consultant, and then this very persuasive man, Rob Pritchard, convinced me that despite having no experience and potentially no skills for the job to become the dean of this fine establishment, the Rotman School of Management. No experience. Never done that before, or anything. So my welcome to the school was, the faculty telling me I had a choice to make. You have to make the school either a research-oriented school, or the faculty are first and foremost involved in research, but you have to understand that the students aren't going to like it very much if the professors all want to be doing research and not teaching. Or, you could make it a teaching-oriented school. But the problem, of course, is no professors are going to want to come and be professors here, because they won't like that. So, good luck!

And I'm sort of thinking, okay, I've just moved my whole family from Boston to here to start this new job. I kind of like succeeding more than failing, sort of like most people. And I'm facing this terrible trade-off. What on earth should I do? And of course, my answer is integrative thinking. And the way I thought through it is, I said, "Well, what's -- is it true that there is this fundamental conflict between teaching and research, so that you simply have to choose?" And I thought about teaching, and I thought about what teaching? What kind of teaching experience does a student just absolutely love and get the most out of? I said -- and I'll test with you to see whether you buy this -- my view was, from my own experience, was when you had somebody who was absolutely passionate about what they were teaching, it actually didn't matter at all what they were teaching. You loved it and learned a lot from it. So I said, students love a passionate teacher, or a passionate professor, okay? Then I said, "Do professors not like teaching at all? There's no form of teaching they really like? They always prefer to do research rather than teaching?" Said no, actually not. What professors absolutely love to teach, and they'll fight for the right to teach -- I then refereed many arguments about, "You're not letting me teach this." And what was the this? PhDs.

STUDENT: Ah.

ROGER: They fought for the right to teach PhD seminars. So I said, what is it about them teaching PhD seminars that makes it so enjoyable for them? Well, the reason is
that they're teaching their research. When they teach PhD courses, they basically are mentoring students on whatever research they're doing. And they love it. And they're passionate about it. So I said, okay, I think we have the potential here for an integration, which is that we know students want passionate professors. And professors are passionate about teaching their research. Let's rather than getting professors to teach courses that are other than their research to teach stuff that's very close to their research. So I said, all second year electives will be second year electives that are the professor's passion. Any other courses, I literally ripped out of the catalogue and said, "We're not teaching that anymore," because there's nobody who is absolutely passionate about that. And I said, even in the first year, where there us a standard course -- in the first year you all take exactly the same courses -- I said even there, if you're a behavioural marketer, just teach them behavioural marketing. You don't have to teach them econometric marketing. It's not the end of the world if they don't learn that stuff. They can pick it up later. It's all about passion.

And what happened since then is that our average teaching ratings, as rated by the students, have essentially gone sky high. They've gone way up. And we've gone from being largely irrelevant in research to the third ranked research faculty on the face of the planet; Harvard, Wharton and then us, up from about nothing. And so rather than there being an obvious trade-off between teaching and research, there wasn't. There was a way to make teaching and research work well together.