Emerging and re-emerging learning communities: Old wisdoms and new initiatives from around the world
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The World Education Forum, held in Dakar in April 2000, adopted the achievement of Education for All (EFA) by 2015 as its target. The ensuing Dakar Framework for Action reaffirmed that education is a fundamental human right and the key to sustainable development, peace and stability within and among countries. It also reaffirmed that education is an indispensable means for effective participation in today’s societies and critical to the economies of the twenty-first century, now largely immersed in the processes of globalization.

In 1990, the World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien) had called for an expanded vision of basic education, defining ‘basic learning needs’ as comprising the essential learning tools (literacy, oral expression, numeracy, etc.), as well as the basic learning content (knowledge, skills, values and attitudes) required by human beings. The Declaration urged nations to intensify their efforts in broadening the means and scope of education in order to meet basic learning needs.

It is all the more clear and compelling today that, given the sheer size of the task of achieving ‘Education for All’, one needs to encourage and capitalize on the successes of all learning initiatives, whether they take place inside or outside of the formal education system.

Cultural heritage is more threatened than ever before. One cannot ignore the fact that children and communities are increasingly exposed to wider learning webs: media, television, market forces, social movements etc. and that the learning acquired in these spaces is also shaping our world. At the same time, movements against the dominant globalization paradigms are emerging worldwide. As a result, new trends and alternative discourses on education and learning in communities are emerging with a view to revisiting and regenerating threatened cultural identities.

The present publication represents a study ‘Search/re-search – Understanding the emergence of pluralist learning societies’ which is the outcome of an on-going exchange between UNESCO and the multicultural civil society network engaged in this discourse. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Ms. Suzanne Schnutten for initiating this exchange and enriching the dialogue with civil society.

UNESCO’s engagement is proof of its search for diversity and new thinking around community learning for pluralist societies. It is also proof of its commitment to ‘humanizing globalization’ and advancing knowledge in its areas of competence within and beyond current international frameworks such as Education for All (EFA), the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD), the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDES), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and others.

The Search/re-search Forum has involved civil society partners from four regions – Asia, Latin America, the Arab States and Africa. Its spirit and rationale were elaborated jointly at two workshops supported by UNESCO, the first held within the framework of the ‘World Social Forum’ in Mumbai (India, 2004) and the second during the ‘Diversity in Learning’ workshop held in Ajloun (Jordan, 2004).

UNESCO and its partners have produced several documents and papers around the emerging alternative discourse (Learning Societies in South Asia; Liberater School; Transforming Community Education into Open Learning Communities, Beyond Empowerment) which clearly indicate that alternative approaches to community education are already a reality.

The present publication, commissioned by UNESCO, has been prepared by Mrs Sheela Pimparé to whom I pay tribute. It is composed of articles from the different regions, most of which were authored by the initiators of alternative learning spaces themselves. The articles concretely describe their driving forces, their principles, their approaches and their challenges. I sincerely hope that this document will give the reader insights into the very close rapport between education and cultural diversity and the opportunities that one can explore.

Shigeru AOYAGI
Chief,
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Paris, November 2005
In the light of mounting discontent over mainstream views of development and education, the inflexible design by the latter for a monoculture and, most of all, their inadequacies in dealing with deeper ecological and human issues, several groups around the world have been searching and re-searching for pathways – both old and new – that embody diversity in learning, knowing and living. This phenomenon, not exclusive to the so-called developing countries, has been on a steady rise around the world over the last few years. It has led several individuals and groups in various countries to critically examine and question the monopoly of one dominant way of learning, knowing and living.

The common urge is to recognize, legitimize and revitalise, or create worldviews underlying diverse traditional cultures, submerged during the last few centuries by the processes of colonisation and development, to regenerate the wisdom embedded in these cultures and to create novel initiatives for learning and growing as communities.

For almost a decade, many population groups around the world have been flourishing, working and thinking in ways that are more attentive to their surroundings and realities and more in harmony with values that stem from their own communities and cultures. Increased networking among these groups in the last few years has contributed to uncovering several old and new initiatives.

Two years ago, we decided to create a learning forum, called Search/re-search, in order to appreciate explorations and inspirations taking place outside of the mainstream and more specifically the learning spaces and processes they reflect in communities. Meetings that brought such groups together for mutual nurturance were held in Udaipur (2002) and Mumbai (2004) in India, Ein Saadeh (2003) in Lebanon, Ajloun, Jerash (2004) in Jordan, and Karachi (2005) in Pakistan.

With the help of a few learning stories and conceptual insights, the current publication illustrates some of the unconventional learning spaces being shaped, and the unusual learning paths being followed.1

It is worth clarifying what we mean by ‘learning societies or communities’, as this in no way implies that certain societies are not involved in the process of learning. Every society is indeed a learning society. The same is true with regards to the term ‘knowledge society’ which we believe to be valid of every society. We have, however, used the term ‘learning communities’ to refer to those individuals and groups who have made the choice of stepping out of ‘mainstream’ logic in order to learn and create other ways of perceiving and constructing life.

We hope that this publication will contribute to exposing the diversity and richness in living, learning and constructing knowledge, as well as the beauty and wisdom that exist in communities and cultures which can be inspiring and mutually nurturing. From this point of view, the concern of the various groups is not so much to seek alternatives to schooling, as to demonstrate the numerous ways in which people are already learning and building knowledge, as well as the kind of environments needed for learning to happen naturally.

Each of the contributions demonstrates an attempt to make sense of one’s experience and culture – requiring a different kind of self-discipline than that required in academia. The examples differ in the sense that they aim to satisfy inner harmony, personal convictions and a sense of responsibility rather

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1. For deeper discussion on the thoughts expressed here, please consult the Non-formal Education webpage on the UNESCO Literacy portal [www.unesco.org/education/literacy](http://www.unesco.org/education/literacy). All materials generated within this Forum can be accessed here.
than outside measures. They acknowledge and nurture learning that springs from living. They dismiss the monopoly, and particularly the assumed superiority, of modernism over other cultures. They work towards reviving the vitality and sensibility of diverse cultures, particularly by supporting communities to regain self-esteem in their own cultures, worldviews and ways of living.

NGOs usually choose to empower communities with tools enabling their integration into mainstream systems and ways of living and contribute to reinforcing the designed path to monoculture. This is precisely what the learning communities are trying to free themselves from. The experiences discussed in this publication differ in many ways in their approach with communities. While most development and education interventions in communities begin with ideas, concepts, often readymade terms, meanings, models, solutions, and theories, the learning communities choose to begin with what people ‘do’, and are ‘experiencing’. The case studies demonstrate that the single most important motivation for learners to continue on their ‘learning journey’ is to make sense of inner experiences.

What one can see, touch, feel, discover and experience constitutes far more valuable learning than what can be acquired through textual learning. Each experience is unique and often does not fit into intellectually-driven theories and off-the-peg solutions. The belief that pluralism is the nature of nature and human beings drives the conviction that there are pluralistic ways of learning and constructing knowledge. The inherent nature of any formal education system denies the latter the opportunity to nurture this pluralism. As a result, one has to search outside the formal institutional framework, not only for existing learning spaces or to recreate those that have disappeared – and there are thousands of them across cultures – but also propose diverse learning paths.

Schools propose one path to knowledge, but experiments are taking place on other paths: spirituality, relationships, senses, play, theatre, or just living. Each path reveals various facets of knowledge and helps the individual to grow and construct his life more meaningfully. In this sense, the issue with schools is not so much about what happens within them (although this is also problematic for many), but their underlying agenda to block and delegitimize other knowledges and ways of learning of communities. In short, they question the hegemony of ‘education’ over ‘learning’.

While interactions with communities in most development interventions begin with an analytical investigation into the problems and needs of communities, learning communities focus on what is abundant in learners already – as individuals, communities and cultures. The Kufunda story in this publication is a good illustration of such an ‘appreciative enquiry’.

Esteva claims that colonisation in the past, and modernisation processes today, thrive on the disvalue of traditional cultures. Disvalue, he says, is not merely devaluation. Devaluation would refer to something that has economic value like stocks or a piece of art. Generating disvalue on the other hand implies getting rid of something that never had economic value, so that the latter can exist.

In communities and cultures that are not ruled by the principle of economic value, but rather by the idea of the common good, defined according to quality of life as perceived by them, disvalue means destroying the fundamental basics of the community’s existence, dissolving their social fabric and making them dependent on, and needy for commodities.

Esteva’s article quotes Marcos Sandoval, a noted Triqui Indian:

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2. By ‘learning journey’, we are not referring to institutions, certificates or degrees, but to the personal path that individual learners walk in life – a path where inner strengths and knowledge unfold and become part of oneself, one’s way of thinking and living.

3. In some places, taking for example the initiative in the Peruvian Andes, an attempt has been made to work with the formal school system to nurture intercultural dialogue. This Peruvian initiative emerged in response to the community desire not to dismiss school, but to transform it so that respect for local cultures and their learning paths can be recovered. There are many other such examples.


5. See The communal freedom to learn, on the Non-formal Education webpage of the UNESCO Literacy Portal www.unesco.org/education/literacy. p.34

6. Taken from a speech made on the occasion of the visit of the King and Queen of Spain to Oaxaca, Mexico in 1992.
From the occidental viewpoint... they keep imposing on us... their civilization... denying all the
knowledge generated by our peoples. We domesticated our corn... and are always improving it... (but)
an agronomist always comes and tells us that numbered corn, produced in their research centre is bet-
ter than ours; if we build a house with our own knowledge and materials, an architect comes and tells
us that in order to live with dignity, we must build it with industrialized materials; if we invoke our ancient
gods, the priests come and tell us that our beliefs are superstition (superchería).

Taking diversity as the common theme, the objective is to support different population groups in
claiming the spirit and wisdom of their cultures which, in turn, provides the foundations for systems,
values and spaces. In the process, another emerging feature is the urge for a critical examination of
modernity and its’ ways and methods, especially from the perspective of other cultures.

A ‘Cultural Regeneration’ programme undertaken by Unitierra in Oaxaca, Mexico, analyses the sit-
uation of local cultures and the impact of modern education campaigns on them. Enabling communities
to have a balanced view of modern and indigenous cultures is vital for cultural diversity and the regen-
eration of indigenous cultures. Another such initiative can be found in Peru around the issue of modern
science and technology. The question is not whether communities need them or not, but rather how to
prepare communities for a critical examination of these ‘cultural imports’ into their communities.

Traditional cultures and indigenous people have been amply studied and examined with tools and
symbols belonging in modern ‘culture’. But they have rarely used their own values, symbols and tools to
examine their own cultures, much less to examine modernity. Grimaldo Rengifo, founder of PRATEC, a
learning community in Peru, argues that the only precondition for dialogue between cultures is to place
them at the same level. It is important to recover the lost value of indigenous knowledge systems.

Interestingly, Dharampal7 comments on contemporary inadequacies in understanding Indian cul-
ture. In Bharatiya Chitta Manas and Kala8, he claims that most studies analyse India from the general
perspective of modernity in order to make the country comprehensible to Westerners. But in fact, what
India needs is a re-awakening of the Indian consciousness in order to make the modern consciousness
comprehensible to it.

In addressing the question of learning, another emerging initiative across the regions caters to the
learning desires of children and youth who have not been able to stay in mainstream education, perhaps
due to well-cited reasons, or purely for lack of meaning, purpose and freedom. We have presented here
a few stories of children who do not wish to pursue their education within mainstream schooling. The
Swapathgami network9 proposes other such stories from across the globe.

“Nuestros Caminos, Una historia de busquedas”, a film produced by Unitierra, Mexico, within
the framework of Search/re-search Forum, accompanies young people who have stepped out of main-
stream schooling to pursue their learning journeys.

“The idea is that we are different and would like others to respect that difference. I would like to live
by my own path and let others pursue the one they wish to. Here (in Unitierra) I can learn what I want
and the way I want to learn it.”10

These stories are not cited as proof of a widespread phenomenon. There is no statistical research
on children and parents who make such choices. However consciously choosing to leave formal
schooling in order to pursue a path more meaningful to the individual child is a reality today, often
supported by parents. It is worth mentioning that we are not referring to those who choose ‘distance
education’ schemes or to those who leave schools in order to pursue the same learning pattern at home
– dominated by the logic of Government curriculum, examinations and certificates.

In accompanying the learning desires of those who wish to step out of this logic, the learning
communities act as guides, providing learning resources, identifying and creating networks for appren-

7. Indian historian and expert on Gandhi.
9. Please refer to www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/walkoutsnetwork.htm
10. Quote from the above-mentioned film.
ticeship and generating spaces where children can come freely to learn without the usual constraints of a uniform curricula, examination system or certificates. The Al Jame’ah initiative in the Arab world, or Unitierra in Mexico, are examples of such spaces. The freedom to learn is strongly defended.

Learning, Holt claimed, is as natural as breathing and the role of adults often comes down to challenging dominant perceptions standing in the way of this natural process. Learning should challenge perceptions of ‘self’ and one’s relationship to the surrounding world, of how people learn and what constitutes knowledge, of dominant values and convictions and clarifying the convictions and values that one would like to live by. Interventions should allow children to rediscover their inner strengths by legitimizing even unconventional learning paths they wish to pursue.

Some of the interventions consist of transforming existing spaces into learning ones. This may mean capitalising on children’s play areas, the market place, fields or even schools such that learning becomes more important than the space or the people occupying it.11

One of the questions often raised is how does one address the need for literacy, the underlying assumption being that without this skill one can easily become disempowered in today’s world. Most people from ‘non-lettered’ communities often wish their children to acquire this skill. Literacy is not denied to anyone who wishes to acquire it and there are numerous examples of learning communities that have found novel ways to address this need when asked for.

The Organic Farmers Association of India, for example, is currently involved in designing a short literacy course for the children of a network of self-taught organic farmers who wish to share their knowledge on organic farming and living – knowledge unavailable in any school or university. Similarly, some of our Arab partners are creating spaces where various cultural expressions form the means for learning. Such spaces are created within public libraries, social groups’ settings working with children and youth, and other community centres. A few stories in this publication illustrate how children learn to read and write even in unconventional learning spaces.

However the main area of contention around literacy is the mindset it sometimes embodies, the culture it radiates and its’ presumed superiority over other ways of communicating and acquiring knowledge.12 Literacy campaigns are known to adversely affect oral cultures. Pawan Gupta protests that the message being conveyed by most literacy campaigns today is that literacy and education mean the same and that the literate are educated.13

In a filmed interview, Dayalchand Soni14 asks the following question:

"Why do schools certify that a child can read and write? Can any school certify that a child will not lie or cheat? Those with a BA degree, be they terrorists, are qualified as ‘educated’ but an ordinary unlettered person leading a simple, fulfilling and self-sufficient life is considered uneducated and a shame to the country, to the extent of needing an intervention whereas from the perspective of humanity we should actually be respecting and learning from him.”

An on-going research study undertaken by Unitierra, Mexico reveals the impact of literacy campaigns on oral traditions and cultural identity. For example, while it used to be common practice to resolve conflict in communities through dialogue, the introduction of literacy in these cultures has legitimised the use of written tools (laws) for conflict resolution. This has limited, if not killed, dialogue in communities.

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11. When Israel closed Palestinian schools and universities for several years starting 1987, several paths were taken. See, for example, Munir Fasheh « The reading campaign experience within Palestinian society: innovative strategies for learning and building community.» Harvard Educational Review, Feb 1995.

12. See, for example, Munir Fasheh’s article « How to eradicate illiteracy without eradicating illiterates » which was presented at UNESCO, Paris, on September 10, 2002 on the occasion of the International Literacy Day.


The same research also reveals how tools used in literacy campaigns introduce new values and understandings around notions of ‘rights’. Community life in indigenous communities is governed by certain obligations, one of which is to voluntarily participate in communal work. For example, this is how community roads are usually constructed. The ‘right to be paid for work’, legitimised by a written tool perceived as superior to an unwritten tradition, has simply wiped these obligations out.

Histories of communities and cultures are today limited to one expression – the written text – whereas the oral traditions still have a lot to convey through poetry, song or story telling or parenting.

In setting up the Search/re-search Forum, we set out to understand how different initiatives are experienced by the communities they are designed to serve. Sometimes the initiatives consist of accompanying an on-going learning process, as in the case of the Organic Farmers’ Association of India. Sometimes an individual or a group, inspired by their own learning journey, has initiated a process that addresses a community that has not necessarily had the same experience. The Kufunda story reflects the personal impressions of some of the individuals Kufunda has helped. These are indeed specific to one story, but we think they are important to acknowledge.

Over and above the desire of parents to see their children acquire literacy skills, most of them in rural areas would confirm that they send their children to school to improve their chances of acquiring employment with their school certificates. Many, weary of what is being taught in mainstream schooling, are attracted by the idea of ‘alternative’ schools which reconnect their children to everyday life, to their own communities, traditions and value systems. But although learning communities seriously question the culture of certification, many of the alternative schooling systems face parents’ concern for official recognition of learning achievements.

Caught between contradicting worldviews, parents look for the middle path. Faced with these contradictions, the intervening groups adopt diverse ways to respond to the community. Some of these are explained in the ensuing articles.  

Within the framework of the Learning Societies Conference, held during the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil 2005, a workshop was organized on ‘Learning processes in indigenous communities’ with participants from Mexico, Peru, Bolivia, Guatemala, Brazil and Argentina. The workshop discussions reiterated the view that State schools have introduced indigenous communities to modernity. This was acceptable to communities as long as they provided jobs. However lack of jobs and the observation that younger generations are not supportive of traditional values and lifestyle, have led communities to re-think schooling. They now ask to incorporate their own value systems and views into the schooling process.

Changes in the world today point to the need to weave wisdom into our conceptions and practices of science, knowledge, literacy, and learning. We believe that a reunion of humanity with wisdom is crucial in today’s world. There is therefore a tremendous need to search for, and shed light on, peoples and communities that embody worlds still rich in wisdom. In turn, education in all its forms should try to weave wisdom into its’ thinking and practice.

A significant characteristic of wisdom is humility. A simple explanation of humility is never to look down on anything and to have the attitude of learning from all. Those who are educated through mainstream institutions usually assume themselves educated in some absolute sense over those who are not. Humility also means that the mind acknowledges that the richness of experience and being is superior to what the mind can comprehend. It acknowledges that there are different types of knowledge and ways of living that one may not understand or agree with. Yet they form part of the earth’s human mosaic.

Wisdom also implies respect and dignity. Humility, respect and dignity are values that are constantly ignored, belittled or violated. One way of doing this has been to compare people (and cultures) along measures that claim to be neutral, objective and universal. But every person and every culture is like a flower in the field of living, having its’ own colour, shape and beauty.

15. Developing Learning Communities, Beyond Empowerment, 2005, UNESCO gives a detailed account of contradictions faced by communities and solutions adopted by the intervening learning community.
One of the good aspects of modern technology is the ease with which one can become acquainted, and interact with people around the world. We thus discover how limited the mind is in its’ ability to understand the richness and diversity that exists. None of the contributions claims to have found a new theory for understanding this richness and diversity. But all depart from the belief that no culture that has survived for thousands of years should be forced to undergo radical change. Each community holds a beauty that forms the source of its dignity and continuity. This does not imply, however, that all communities are static entities. Everything is in flux and interconnected and this, in turn, forms the basis of wisdom.

Nor does the present publication claim to present an overview of what learning communities are, or of what they are doing. It would be impossible to capture the tremendous diversity of what is happening in a publication. The few extracts of insights and abridged learning stories presented here are of those who participated on the Search/re-search Forum.

We decided collectively to leave the freedom to document learning initiatives to the participants in any way they desired and we do hope that the wide scope of the publication in terms of themes, concerns and regions will give the reader a fair idea of the emerging discourse on learning and education16.

Finally, we would like to mention that some of the language or expressions used by the different authors may sound provocative. Their stories are indeed thought-provoking. However in writing these articles, the spirit has essentially been to remain as honest as possible with one’s feelings and convictions, as well as true to one’s experiences and contemplations. We do hope that the reader perceives the following stories in this light.

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16. Besides the written stories, this initiative has also generated a few films – a list of which appears at the end of this publication.
UNIQUE LEARNING PATHS
TO CREATE NEW LEARNING SPACES:
UNFOLDING THE DIVERSITY
OF LEARNING INITIATIVES
Universidad de la Tierra (Unitierra),
the freedom to learn

Gustavo Esteva
Mexico

The Universidad de la Tierra (Unitierra) in Oaxaca, Mexico, is committed to ideals and social relationships that are often divergent from the dominant winds. The initiative sets out to enrich life in the urban barrios and rural communities of Oaxaca by enabling people to creatively employ their skills, efforts and abilities, as much as organize their own lives. In doing so, they are able to attain a satisfying and dignified life and realize activities that are useful to others.

The initiative was born in the context of the ‘Project for Oaxaca from civil society’, created by a group of Oaxacans and civil society organizations in 1999. Activities have to be economically feasible, socially-just and ecologically sensible. In this way, the learners will not become dependant on being hired by public agencies or private businesses or rather be at their mercy for an income.

Learners should be capable of independently proposing services that are useful to people and organizations and thereby generate satisfactory earnings. They could also be engaged in a satisfactory salaried job in an organization needing their services. But it is important to note that we are not a vocational training institute. We wish to create or support autonomous ways of living, linked to the conditions and aspirations of the individuals or groups who come to us.

Learning in Unitierra fundamentally unfolds from the following principles:

- Control over learning is in the hands of the person who learns. It does not depend on a system of control and grading by teachers or tutors, nor is it based on the efforts of those who teach. It is based on the interest, initiative and determination of the person who learns. He or she should be able to regulate the rhythm, reach and conditions of his own learning with the active support of Unitierra.
- Learning is achieved in practice through observation and experience. Skills, abilities and capacities are acquired by way of direct observation of the activities one desires to learn and through concrete practice.
- Observation, as much as practice, is realized with the support of a tutor: an individual who carries out a set of activities in an able manner and knows how to share that knowledge.
- Abstract information and theoretical knowledge is also necessary and forms part of the professional practice and gives it more solidity and consistency.
- To facilitate the acquisition of such information and knowledge useful in professional practice, Unitierra organizes specialized lecture circles, seminars, conferences and workshops. The resulting skills acquisition will be immediately put to test in the concrete exercise of that activity.

Reclaiming our freedom to learn

People come to us from villages and the barrios. They are mostly indigenous and often naive refuseniks, fed up with the classroom. They come with curiosity, rather than conviction, having already heared about the Universidad de la Tierra from friends or acquaintances and deciding to give it a try.

17. The author can be reached at gustavoesteva@terra.com.mx. This is an extract of the article, The Communal Freedom to Learn, available on the Non-formal education webpage on the UNESCO Literacy portal. http://www.unesco.org/education/literacy.
They know that we have no teachers or curricula and don’t provide educational services. They love the idea that they will be in full control of their own learning paths – the content, rhythm, conditions. But it is not easy for them to take such control into their own hands. Even those who have endured school for only a few years are already conditioned to be passive receptacles for instruction.

They soon discover that what we are doing is just reclaiming types of apprenticeship as old as the hills and complementing them with contemporary practices to ensure shared learning and study. Well-rooted in traditions and in our own places, some times tiptoeing through abandoned pathways, at other times enjoying the company of many others used to visiting these places of encounter, we are simply, recovering from the amnesia that characterises modern times.

As soon as young people arrive at Unitierra, they begin working with a person already engaged in the skill they want to learn and who is willing to accept them as an apprentice. They may attend specific workshops to shorten the time needed to achieve those skills While working and observing these mentors, our ‘students’ usually discover the use of certain books. As apprentices with an agrarian lawyer, for example, they observe how he refers to certain articles of Agrarian Law and curiously seeks out that little book full of weird statements.

Our ‘students’ have been learning faster than we expected. After a few months, they are usually encouraged to return to their communities to put into practice what they have been learning so that it can be of use to their communities. Some of them creatively combine different areas of knowledge. One person, for example, combined organic agriculture and soil regeneration (his original interest) with vernacular architecture. He expanded and enriched his area of interest through a multiplicity of experiences and mentors, which is nothing more than what a campesino would in the normal course do.

We are very proud of our first ‘graduate’. When this woman asked for admission to Unitierra, she had already twice dropped out from mainstream education institutions and had been practicing healing through massage. After introducing her to a traditional healer, it became clear that she had a special gift. She is now practicing diverse traditional forms of medicine – the indigenous ones of Oaxaca, but also Chinese, Indian and others. She uses acupuncture, homeopathy, massage, traditional remedies or whatever she discovers on the Internet or through friends. Many people solicit her skills.

She does not charge any fees, but instead accepts a ‘cooperación’, a beautiful communal word for mutual giving and receiving. She receives eggs, chickens, vegetables and money in return for her services. The time she has to devote to this activity (her family and children being her main priority) is fully engaged by various people, including myself, who find in her a caring friend and a very competent healer.

Another ‘student’ has been coming back to Unitierra time and again. In his first year he learned how to produce radio programmes, videos, journals and other skills in popular communication. He has even been awarded a national prize for one of his films. When his community discovered these skills, they called him back and he now enjoys a very dignified position in that community. He returns to Unitierra from time to time to quench his appetite for learning – how to design dry toilets or to improve his skills in organic farming. He shares what he already knows with other ‘students’ whenever he is around, mentoring them as he does his community brothers.

In order to define areas of apprenticeship, we explored with the communities both the kind of knowledge or skills not currently available to them and the kind of learning they wanted for their young. Following the request of the communities and our own convictions, our ‘students’ are learning first and foremost how to stay in their own regions and lead a dignified life. Whenever someone wishes to receive a type of training that will enable them to leave their communities or our province, we refer him or her to other institutions. Unitierra is for those who wish to stay and prosper in Oaxaca, not for those who want to become transient vandals, as our beloved Wendell Berry would put it.

**Why Unitierra?**

We don’t really need Unitierra to do what we are doing. In fact, we have been already doing it for a long time. We packaged our activities under the rubric of a University (with no teachers, no classrooms, no curriculum and no campus) only after careful reflection... and in a very light-hearted spirit.
Years ago, we began to observe in villages and the barrios, particularly among Indigenous peoples, a radical reaction and resistance against education and schooling. A few communities began to by-pass the school or closed them altogether, expelling their teachers, in order to avoid political conflict. These communities have since been reclaiming and regenerating the conditions in which people traditionally learn.

Ivan Illich mentioned to David Cayley,

*In 1954, UNESCO, at its regional meeting in South America, complained that the main obstacle to education was the indifference of parents to send their children to school. Fifteen years later, they had to notice that the demand for schooling exceeded the number of available classrooms by seven times. (Cayley 1992, p. 117).*

The UNESCO led campaign in the above period was very successful. Parents were made more aware of the need to send their children to school, only to find that there weren’t enough school places or teachers. Ever since, no Latin American country has been able to fully satisfy the demand for education.

For many years, communities have also suffered the damage inflicted by schooling to their children and participated in all kinds of efforts to reform or improve the system – better equipment or staff, alternative curricula, bilingual education, parents’ participation, more and more schools and so on. And finally, like the Zapatistas, they said ¡Basta, Enough!

Benjamin Maldonado, a young anthropologist, designed tests to compare those children attending school with those out-of-school. The latter knew more about everything, except the national anthem. And those going to school looked down on their communities and cultures, subordinating their minds and hearts to the authority of the teacher (Moldonado, 1988).

Illich also said to Cayley:

“Today I know from my own experience that there is widespread cynicism, not only among old people – grand parents or great grandparents – but among people who went through school, and who don’t see any reason why their children should go through the same experience. People can see what scientists and administrators cannot” (Cayley 1992, p.117).

In fact, the villagers are aware that school impedes children from learning what they need, to continue living in their communities, to contribute to their common prosperity, and to that of their soils and their homes. And it does not offer them an appropriate preparation for life or work out of the community either. They no longer attribute their children’s learning to school.

It is also true that many do not dare to withdraw their children from primary school. They do not want to deprive them of the school certificate, which is a requisite for life in modern society. But in our communities, even those still sending their children to school have developed several approaches to thwart the damage being done to their families and lives. They support their children in active resistance at school and create for them alternative opportunities to learn whatever they feel passionate about. Some parents observed with satisfaction that their children were learning everything they need and want in the community.

But they soon had another concern. What, if their children wanted to learn something more, outside of the community, and had no diploma to pursue their interests? They knew by experience what happens to those who leave their communities to pursue “higher education”. More often than not, they do not come back and usually get caught up in degrading jobs in the city.

A recent official study found that only 8% of all graduates of Mexican universities will be able to work in the field they graduated in. Certified lawyers or engineers are driving taxis or tending stalls. In spite of such awareness, people still hold the illusion that higher education may have something to offer and don’t feel comfortable in depriving their children of such an ‘opportunity’.

Others, who realise that such ‘opportunities’ actually constitute a dead end, recognize that their youngsters need to learn many things that they cannot learn in the community, in order to be able to deal with the current situation. Globalization is clearly encroaching into their lives. No community is isolated anymore. We are all increasingly intertwined, interdependent.
In Etla, the little town where my grandmother was born, a group of women milk their cows and produce magnificent cheese and butter. In recent years, they can no longer sell their produce and instead are being forced to sell their cows. Oaxaca’s market is now flooded with butter from New Zealand, which is neither better nor cheaper. The retail trade is increasingly controlled by big corporations. The same ones are now bringing transgenic corn from Michigan to Oaxaca, with subsidies from both the United States and the Mexican government, thus endangering bio-diversity in the place where the plant has originated. Half of our men from Oaxaca have now worked outside of their communities, often in Mexico City or in the US, at least once in their lives.

In the face of all this, we created our university. Young men or women without any diploma or even those who have never attended school can come to us. They can learn whatever they want including practical trades like topography or law, or other disciplines like history, philosophy, astronomy, etc. They would accomplish their learning as apprentices with others practicing those trades or engaged in the concerned discipline. They would also learn how to learn with modern tools and practices not available in their communities.

We call it a university to play with the symbols of the official system. The idea is to use to our benefit all symbols that we perceive as tools of domination. Or rather, as Illich says, to misuse for our own purposes what the state or market produce.

After one or two years of learning, once the learner’s peers think he or she is competent in a specific trade, we give the ‘students’ a university diploma. We are thus offering ‘social recognition’ by peers and communities – recognition denied by the education system. We certify a specific competence which can be immediately appreciated by the communities and also protect our ‘students’ against discrimination. We thus offer Unitierra diplomas to people who have perhaps never attended a regular school or university.

Ivan was the first to see in the process of schooling “a ritual creating a myth on which contemporary society then builds itself” (Cayley 1992, p.67). Our diplomas are not rituals, as are those of the official educational system. According to Gluckman, in Illich’s interpretation, those participating in a ritual cannot see the discrepancy between its purpose and its consequences. If it doesn’t rain after a rain dance, you may blame yourself but not the ritual.

More and more people have been discovering the discrepancy between the stated/articulated purpose of schooling and its outcomes. Our diplomas represent an additional challenge to the myth, instead of reinforcing it. They are an expression of people’s autonomy. As a symbol, they represent the commitment of our ‘students’ to their own community, not a right to demand anything.

Radical hope, the very essence of popular movements, is not the conviction that something will go well, but, as Vaclav Havel once said, the conviction that something makes sense, no matter what happens. This is the kind of hope we share in Unitierra – not the expectation of transforming any of our ‘students’ into something. Both the ‘students’ and the staff are doing something that makes sense. No one knows the consequences.

On the question of discipline and freedom

In Unitierra we are not churning out professionals. We have created a convivial place where we can all enjoy learning with each other. But ‘students’ and their communities soon discover that a stay at Unitierra is not a vacation. There may not be classes or projects, formal obligations or compulsory activities. But there is discipline, rigor and commitment towards their group (the other ‘students’), towards us (participating in all kinds of activities for Unitierra) and towards their communities. And they have hope.

How is this possible? Doesn’t this resemble Summerhill... and will we have the same outcome? There is, in fact, an important contextual difference which struck us recently. A young urbanite came to Unitierra from Mexico City. He stayed for two months and left, overcome with a feeling of frustration. He also left a painful sense of disaffection on the other ‘students’ and the staff. This person was individualized and westernized and was perhaps suffering from what Kundera once called ‘uniformed egocentrism’ (1998, p. 248), a condition affecting many modern young people. This younger did not have in his vital experience what is the usual endowment of all our ‘students’: to be community, in flesh and bone;
to feel, deeply in your heart, the obligation and responsibility with the social fabric of the community. Our ‘students’ do not belong to communities. They are their communities and have a responsibility to those communities, that is, to themselves. And hope. That is why they can have discipline, rigor, and commitment.

Our ‘students’ have the internal and social structure that is a fundamental condition for real freedom. If you are individual atoms belonging to a collective, you need some one in charge of the organization. A group of billiard balls cannot stay together by themselves. The workers of a union, the members of a political party or church, the students of any school, the citizens of a country... all of them need organizers and external forces to keep them together. In the name of security and order, they sacrifice freedom. Real people, persons, knots in nets of relationships, can be together by themselves, in freedom. They may use political and legal procedures to generate and express their consensus, creating autonomously the rules for their harmonious coexistence. That is also what our ‘students’ are learning in Unitierra, sharing their knack for it with others, because many of them are experts.

And friendship?

In De-schooling Society, Illich wrote at the end of the book:

What characterizes the true master-disciple relationship is its priceless character. Aristotle speaks of it as a “moral type of friendship, which is not in fixed terms: it makes a gift, or does whatever it does, as to a friend”. Thomas Aquinas says of this kind of teaching that inevitably it is an act of love and mercy. This kind of teaching is always a luxury for the teacher and a form of leisure (in Greek, “schole”) for him and his pupil: an activity meaningful for both, having no ulterior purpose (1970b, 101).

The main point about friendships is that they are free. You engage in them, not because there is an economic exchange involved, but for the simple joy of it. Friendship should have no ulterior purpose. In a similar way, learning together is not a means towards an end, but an end in itself, for the joy of it. It is a pleasure to do it with friends, as an expression of friendship.

We all know that in a room with 10, 20, 40 or 400 students you cannot befriend them. You are performing and they are listening. You are not their friend. You have a professional relation with them and certain obligations. They also have certain obligations with you. It is not gratis.

How different is Unitierra? The ‘students’ coming to Unitierra are not our friends. When we put them in contact with a person doing what they want to learn, they are not friends. We know very well that you cannot create friendship. You cannot force it. There is always a personal element of mutual attraction for friendships to flourish.

Austerity has been a key element in the creation of a social environment in which friendships emerge and flourish. Austerity, as Aquinas clarified, is a virtue that does not exclude our delight. It does not exclude wine and women. It only excludes those delights that degrade personal relationships. Austerity often includes techno fasting, renouncing anything that can be an obstacle for friendship, excluding any tool or technology that can create a distance between friends. Austerity, as a virtue, wrote Ivan 30 years ago, “is part of another virtue which is more fragile and embrace and overcome it; joy, friendship”. (1973, México: Posada, 1978, p.16).

We are not a community of friends in Unitierra. Nevertheless, friendship is at the very centre of our activities. If any of our ‘mentor’ friends feels uncomfortable with an apprentice or vice versa, both are free to ask for a change. That is the flexibility and openness we need to walk our own path – creating a situation in which no condition for learning is scarce and our challenge is then to deal with the affluence of joy and friendship which may overwhelm us.

References:

1) Cayley, D, 1992, Ivan Illich in conversation, House of Anansi Press, Concord
3) Illich, I, 1978, La convivencialida, Posada theoretical, Mexico
4) Kundera, M, 1998, Los testamentos Traicionados, Tusquets, Barcelona
The word ‘bath’ in Arabic is used for both search and research. Irrespective of whether one is searching for a path to follow in life, for an answer to a question, to regenerate a cultural treasure or to study a certain phenomenon – all of these things fall under the same word: bath. When I was searching – back in the 1970s – for experiences that connect mathematics to the real life of people, it led me to several things. First, it led to a different perception and conception of mathematics. Second, it led to the recognition of how my mother used to calculate - her maths. Thirdly, it made me aware of what Wendell Berry reminds us: modern man “has been genetically deprived of the ability to subtract.”

In my case, the process of ‘subtraction’ happened at 3 levels: ‘subtracting’ my mother’s knowledge from the knowledge recognized by educational institutions; ‘subtracting’ the harm caused by the dominant knowledge in textbooks and public discourse; and the importance of ‘subtracting’ (unlearning) a lot of what I had already learned in schools and universities. This personal encounter with diversity inspired me to do more search and research in relation to diversity in other fields of knowledge, especially in the sciences, which I had studied and taught for many years.

What I am alluding to is a ‘search’ as ‘pursuit of truth’, which is diametrically opposed to claiming truth. In my case, an essential part of pursuing truth has been the search for myths that I internalized while growing up (and have been continuously working to heal from them), such as the belief that science and knowledge are intrinsically good (and can only go wrong in their applications), that all knowledge can be expressed in language, that maths is the queen of sciences, that maths and science require higher intelligence than other fields, that there is a single universal path for progress, and that human beings can be compared along objective universal lines.

My first period of questioning the dominant knowledge system occurred around the time of the 1967 Israeli Arab war. I was teaching at Birzeit College in Palestine and began to question the good contained in knowledge when it could not help me comprehend what was going on around me. How could I justify the knowledge that I was “selling” to my students when it was so obviously irrelevant? What does it mean to know? My first attempts to understand and answer such questions stayed within dominant perceptions. I focused for example on the lack of logical/scientific thinking as the problem.

During the 1970s, I was searching for good examples to connect maths to life. As a true academic, I started looking for examples in books and magazines. In my search I came across my illiterate mother’s calculations. That was in 1976. It took me eight years to digest what I realized and to have the courage to write about it. I digested it in the sense of unlearning a lot of what I had already internalized through my education, and acquiring a new perspective. It took me another four years to have the courage to address an assembly of 200 people in an international conference and say it out-loud, and another two years to publish it!

18. The author can be contacted at mfasheh@yahoo.com
19. Please refer to Community education is to regain and transform what has been made invisible, Feb. 1990, Harvard Educational Review Realising my mother's math had a deep impact on my thinking and work
20. Life is a miracle, 2000, (p.21), Counterpoint, Washington, D.C.
In writing my doctoral dissertation, I had to battle with one of my readers to include my mother’s knowledge as legitimate and acceptable. Realizing her maths was the most profound and revealing shock in my life. However, I continued to be naïve in assuming that her knowledge and mine stem from the same root and can be squeezed under a more comprehensive kind of knowledge. I tried to put her knowledge into my symbols and ways. I believed that it was my responsibility to transform hers into mine. I was searching for ways to connect the two for a more comprehensive understanding. Eventually, I realized that my search was in vain. That search and experience pointed to the importance of humility and pluralism in living: humility of the mind and pluralism of knowledge.

With the tumbling down of old ‘myths’, new ones began to emerge in my mind – the main one being that every person should value his or her experience, and that this is fundamental to learning and constructing knowledge. It led me to the belief that the learning that stems from teaching lacks depth and is the least effective kind of learning.

One question, however, stayed with me for several years “How could I have lived with my mother for 35 years before realizing her wisdom and knowledge – living all those years thinking that she was illiterate, ignorant and knowledge-less?” I started searching for the roots of that absence in my life. What makes it so easy to discredit her knowledge? Why is it so easy to blind and deceive the mind through symbols and words? I searched for many years to understand how something, which is so obviously mathematical, could go unrecognized by a person, who by that time had studied and taught maths for almost 30 years?

Finally, in January 2001, while sharing my concerns with Gustavo Esteva in Oaxaca, Mexico, he asked whether I had ever read anything by Ivan Illich. I replied “De-schooling Society”. He encouraged me to read more, and I did. This led me to see Illich as an ‘archaeologist of concepts’. His work helped me to see the historic roots, not only to the answer to my question, but also to many dimensions of modern life, including the role of officially-taught languages in controlling minds. Illich helped me see the roots of modern concepts and institutions, and question dominant perceptions and conceptions of knowledge.21

In my pursuit of truth, the limits of my world started becoming clearer and the doors of another world began to open up – a world of living, learning and knowing which is radically different from mine. Words started gaining new and personal meanings. In particular, ‘search’ began to mean persistent pursuit of truth that becomes part of my way of living, a pursuit that stems from a personal challenge, or a concern for a certain aspect of the human condition, a pursuit that is connected to making sense of my experience.

In 1998, I came across Imam Ali’s statement, which became the guiding principle of the Arab Education Forum and later on of Al-jame’ah. This statement had the same impact on me at the cultural level as my mother’s maths at the personal level. Both sensations sprang from being immersed in living and trying to make sense of what I was doing. In the process – I was searching for what was truthful to my context and inner convictions and this led me to re-search for those things that exist, but are made invisible or invaluable by the dominant discourse.

The need to recognize the tremendous resources that we have, and with which we can build an authentic future, was then confirmed. These include what people do with themselves as human beings, and with what is available in one’s community, surroundings, and culture. In other words, the task that we face is to make our societies better from within. We need to build on our inner strengths.

Valuing one’s experience, and making sense of it, form the backbone of building our inner worlds and the social fabric among us. It is the basis of deepening our roots and, at the same time, of dialoguing with others around the world. The only way we can talk with the world is through authentic expressions of personal experiences. It is the basis of co-authoring meanings and measures, and of constructing knowledge. In my case, words that I feel I co-authored in the process of realizing my mother’s math include: knowledge, math, pluralism, dignity, humility.

21. See, for example, Shadow Work, 1981, Marion Boyars Publications, Boston and London
This led to another basic question. How do we perceive experience? What do I mean by this? Realizing my mother’s maths and knowledge constitutes an experience because it happened unexpectedly, without pre-determination or planning or awareness. At first, I did not have the right words or concepts to describe it. I struggled for many years before I was able to comprehend it and be able to articulate it and write about it.

We need to remember that experience is much more than comprehension and language. It is experiencing something – as much as possible – without ‘pre-interference’ of words. Valuing one’s experience does not mean recounting what one has done or cataloguing the awards accomplished. It is not manifested through dominant terms and meanings – because, then, that would be valuing the dominant discourse and not the experience. The valuing I am talking about can neither be measured nor compared with other experiences. Each experience is unique and fully contextualized.

Experience as I mean it here necessarily embodies independent investigation of meaning. It also embodies respect for the convictions that are in harmony with one’s experience, even if people – experts, professionals, and institutions – disagree with the path one chooses. It is being true to the reality as one experiences it and to the convictions and values one lives by.

*Al-jame’ah* embodies ‘learning for all and from all’ rather than ‘education for all’. It recognises and provides spaces and opportunities where people can learn in a way that is guided by their realities and what they do, a way that does not have to satisfy any authority other than truthfulness to the experience, to one’s contemplations on it, to one’s convictions, and to the context in which one lives and works. The idea of *Al-jame’ah* grew out of recognizing/ providing such spaces, where knowledge is not sold or bought or compared, but shared and constructed together.

The concept was first presented in a conference on models for Arab universities held at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, in October 2003. It was later discussed with various people and groups at a meeting of Learning Societies within the framework of the World Social Forum, Mumbai, India, January 2004, and further in a conference on Diversity in Learning, in Jordan, April 2004. Several groups from around the world were involved in these meetings. The first manifestation of *Al-jame’ah* took place in Cairo in January 2004.

*Al-jame’ah* is the Arabic word for university, and its’ meaning in Arabic is appropriate to the idea. It means gathering ‘elements’ to create opportunities for learning and for mutual nurturance, enrichment and growth. It is an affirmation of the way people have always learned throughout the ages. The idea of *Al-jame’ah* is simple: the basic ingredient in learning is a learner; everything else is there. A learner, within *Al-jame’ah* refers to a person who is doing something and wants to understand it more and do it better – personally or in cooperation with others (‘better’ here is used in a sense that embodies the five meanings of yuhsen in the ‘guiding principle’ – see below). And any person who can be helpful or inspiring to a learner and ready to open one’s heart and mind is part of the ‘faculty’.

Every person thus can be both a student and a teacher. We have neither full time students nor full time faculty. Moreover, any place that one can reach, and is hospitable and relevant for the learner, and/ or has resources that can be helpful to people’s understanding and knowledge, is part of the ‘campus’. This means that anyone inspired by the idea of *Al-jame’ah* and sees it relevant to one’s life/context, or to what s/he does or would like to do, can join the effort. There is no central authority from which one needs to receive approval or permission.

Search/re-search within *Al-jame’ah* is not geared to the needs of the market, as much as to personal growth and understanding. This does not necessarily imply opposition to the market, but suggests that personal growth and understanding are the main concern. In other words, search and re-search are related to those experiences with a direct bearing on the searcher’s way of living and becoming part of the person’s lifestyle. Expressed differently, *Al-jame’ah* is interested in knowledge that is not detached from the person’s life and way of living. In this sense, there is no meaning for researching if one is not searching.

In searching for what makes sense in one’s life, the person will most probably need to re-search (search again) for what has been lost or made invisible or worthless in ways of living, knowing, learning, understanding, relating – in one’s own culture. The person may also need to search for elements that
s/he needs in order to deepen understanding within a wider perspective. Thus, searching for meaning and truthfulness in one’s life is part of this perspective, and the accompanying research stems from that inner calling and personal passion/concern (rather than just helping advance one’s career or as a requirement for graduation, or because of the existence of funds). My new perception grew out of my 30-year struggle to make some sense out of teaching and learning, to understand why certain forms of knowledge are included in academia and others are not, and to clarify the meaning of words such as development, progress and pluralism.

**Al-jame’ah** is not only for those with degrees driving to get a job. It is geared towards people who are involved in doing something, including those accomplished in their fields, who welcome opportunities to meet and interact with people for an exchange of mutually enriching and nurturing experiences. It also welcomes those who are uninterested by, or have been refused entry to, existing educational institutions.

**Qeematu kullimri’en ma yuhsenoh: the guiding principle**

Since 1998, the main guiding principle in the Arab Education Forum’s (AEF) thinking and work has been a 1400 year old statement by Imam Ali: *qeematu kullimri’en ma yuhsenoh*. The statement means that the worth of a person is what s/he yuhsen.

In Arabic, *yuhsen* has several meanings, which together embody the spirit of *Al-jame’ah*. Firstly, it means that the person does what s/he does well, in terms of skills and talents. Secondly, that the person gives of oneself. Thirdly, that what s/he does is beautiful (the aesthetic dimension). Fourth, that what he/she does is good for the community. Last but not least, that the person is respectful in discussions.

**Al-jame’ah** embodies the above in several ways. A person’s worth is not judged by professional committees or official bodies, or by measures that claim to be neutral, objective, and universal, but by the five meanings embedded in the word yuhsen. Thus, the community in which the person lives is crucial in judging one’s worth.

Imam Ali’s statement could have formed a basis of a vision of learning/education – at least in the Arab world. But during the “development age”, i.e. post World War II, we were not able to construct the “imaginary” countries and societies that we were promised by Western powers and nationalist or socialist movements. In fact, it seems insane in any society to start with what they don’t have and ignore what they have. Recognizing and building on the resources that people, communities and cultures possess (including wisdoms and insights by visionaries in one’s civilization) is the way to build an authentic future.

**Al-jame’ah** encourages three ways of learning that have historically been part of the human experience but are currently ignored: apprenticeship, small discussion groups and articulation of life journeys/learning paths. The experience so far makes it clear that it is crucial that these ways be encouraged within **Al-jame’ah**. Their absence is unjustified – to say the least.

Within **Al-jame’ah**, we reverse the maxim that currently exists in academia. We start with life and experiences to form concepts/abstractions rather than the other way round; we start with what is abundant rather than with what is scarce; with strengths and what is beautiful in people, communities and cultures rather than with needs, problems and what is lacking; and we start with how people perceive themselves and what they do, and their relationship to the world around them rather than by how institutions and professionals see them – things that are rarely done in existing educational institutions although they are crucial in learning.

Currently, **Al-jame’ah** is focussing on: developing a web site devoted to it; building a vibrant and active ‘fabric’ among its partners; and exploring possibilities of hospitable and generous spaces where people can meet, dream, converse and do things.

**References:**

2) Fasheh, M, 1990, *Community education is to regain and transform what has been made invisible*, Harvard Educational Review, Feb. 1990

22. For more insights, please see the article on *Learning for all and from all* in the present publication.
Manifestations of Al-jame’ah

*Munir Fasheh,*
Arab Education Forum

It is worth mentioning here that most manifestations represent the many ways in which people live and learn, in harmony with the various meanings of *yuhsen*. What follows are some examples that were organized by Arab Education Forum in collaboration with interested individuals and groups. The first manifestation of *Al-jame’ah* was the workshop that was arranged with Ellabad in Cairo.

The illustrators’ apprenticeship and learning together in Cairo

Ten people in the field of illustrations from 7 Arab countries met in Cairo for two to four weeks and worked with Mohye Ed-Din Ellabad. They were: Emad Hajjaj (Jordan), Osama Hajjaj (Jordan), Saad Hajo (Syria/Lebanon), Sahar Burhan (Syria/Lebanon), Sonia Wajo (Morocco), Salah Madany Elmur (Sudan), Raouf Karrai (Tunisia), Rania Amin (Egypt), Dunia Abdallah (Egypt), Mohye Ed-Din Ellabad (Egypt).

Ellabad has a long and diverse experience as an illustrator, writer, graphic designer, and producer of books and magazines for children and adults. He does not however perceive himself in terms of a skilled professional alone but rather in terms of a person trying to be as attentive as possible to his environment and using illustrations and words to express his experience as honestly as possible.

The ten people who met in Cairo are accomplished artists in their fields. Despite their jobs and busy schedules, they did not refuse our suggestion to stay with Ellabad in Cairo. They all felt that, by being together, they could gain a broader understanding of what they do, and possibly acquire new skills and perspectives.

During their stay in Cairo, they were all ‘teachers’ and ‘learners’. They exchanged their works, publications, books and articles that they found useful in their work and life. The workplace of Ellabad, and people and places they visited, all formed part of the “campus” and its resources and facilities. They visited artists and workplaces in Cairo and Alexandria and were inspired by some of what they saw. The gathering in Cairo was simply a “learning community”, where friendships developed, and arrangements for future cooperation on some common projects started. Follow up of such cooperation will be posted on AEF’s website.

What took place in Cairo embodies a set of values/principles/convictions that lie at the heart of *Al-jame’ah*. These include: diversity in learning needs to be acknowledged and budgeted for; every person is a teacher and a learner (nurturing is always mutual); each person is uniquely complete (no one can be a copy of another); learning involves both building the inner world of each person and the social, spiritual, intellectual, and cultural fabric among the group; and experiential maturity should precede or be concomitant with understanding and knowing.

The workshop of The Untold Stories

This workshop took place within the *Al’jana* annual summer camp in Broummana High School, Broummana, Lebanon. The camp included 150 people (both Palestinians and Lebanese) who work with children and youth in the refugee camps or in poor areas in Lebanon. Fifteen artists and cultural ‘creativists’ from various countries (including Italy, France, the UK, Germany, the US, Mexico, and India in addition to Arab countries) joined the work camp and conducted workshops on forum theatre, storytelling, clowning & juggling, body & mask, untold stories, art with children in difficult circumstances, educational
toys, magical tricks, non-competitive games, music & disability, choreography & improvisation with children, and **Dabke** (folkloric dance).

The **Untold Stories** workshop exemplifies the spirit of **Al jame’ah**. Three of us contributed to the idea: Charlotte Saenz from Mexico (who worked with women in Chiapas, with street youth in Chicago, with youth in Lebanon, and currently an ‘artist in residence’ at the University of Chicago), Shilpa Jain one of the founders of Shikshantar in Udaipur, India (www.swaraj.org/shikshantar) and myself. The workshop revolved around themes that were at the intersection of our respective ideas: Scheherazade, walkouts-walk ons, and **queematu kullimri’en ma yuhsenoh**, the guiding principle of **Al jame’ah**.

Charlotte Saenz in her earlier work with youth in Lebanon in 2003, used the legend of Scheherazade in the Arabian Nights to encourage youth to replace Scheherazade’s stories with their own. At the workshop, we used this method to encourage participants in the workshop to tell their stories...

We owe much to the many Persian, Arabian, and Indian co-creators of what is now known as **Alf Layla wa Layla** (one thousand and one nights), whose beauty lies in its nested structure evolved over several centuries. Similarly we co-create our life-stories by reviving, preserving and reconstructing memories, joys, and sorrows. With each telling and re-telling we etch deeper into our personal and collective memories.

The second theme of the workshop was exploring the sense of a person’s worth in light of Imam Ali’s insight mentioned in the previous article. This way of understanding one’s worth not only counters dominant measures (degrees, financial wealth, material possessions), but also relocates power in peoples’ hands. A crucial dimension of such worth is making sense of one’s experience. No external authority has any power over another person’s story.

Challenging these methods of control, measurement and competition is even more difficult, because these ‘tools’ are rarely questioned and overwhelmingly seen as positive. Beginning with our real experiences and telling untold stories often open up different ways of seeing and relating, and actually can be healing for both individuals and society. The question that embodied this spirit, and which we used in working with participants, was: what do you **yuhsen**?

The third element brought to the workshop by Shilpa from her experiences and work in India was the issue of walkouts/ walk-ons. Last October, Shilpa and a friend from India went to Lebanon to work with groups engaged with walkouts (often referred to in the dominant discourse as ‘dropouts’). They brought with them from India and around the world stories of people who found it necessary to walk their own paths of learning and living, and encouraged people to gather such stories from Lebanon. The idea involves ‘walking out’ of a situation of suppression or violation in order to ‘walk on’ with one’s thoughts, speech, actions, relationships, to be in ways that are in greater alignment with their selves and deepest values. In some sense, everyone in his or her life has, at some point, walked out and walked on. It is very exciting to reflect on one’s life and discover those instances.

With these intersections, the ‘Untold Stories’ workshop had 3 main aspects and embodied a different logic:

1. **Valuing selves**: taking time to see the good in each person, to recognize the strengths, talents, powers, rooted in us.
2. **Challenging unjust, illegitimate power**: questioning and resisting those places, institutions, structures, tools, attitudes, which are suppressing and destroying the good, beautiful, meaningful parts of ourselves and our societies and cultures.
3. **Appreciative inquiry**: noticing the strengths and beauty in other people, places, relationships, and using different ways of listening, questioning, interacting, to transform the challenges of our lives.

We were not interested in a ‘final product’ or a ‘result’. Rather our objective was to better understand our own worth, our challenges and our possibilities, and to see where each of us stands in his/her own learning journey. Each process also helped to illustrate that there is no one ‘best’ path; that each path offers learning and unlearning...

23. The story of Scheherazade within Arab culture is a wonderful legend about transforming Shahrayar’s brutal power by story telling.
What emerged out of both the workshops was a surprise to all of us. Somehow, a community was built, in which we were all deeply sharing our minds, hearts, bodies, and spirits. We were engaging in multiple spaces and ways of learning. New understandings were emerging, often as re-appreciations of traditional wisdoms and local knowledges. We also were taking time to ask hard questions, to notice what goes unnoticed, to appreciate our experiences and appreciate each other. In addition to knowledge that was constructed about selves, meanings of words such as wisdom, pluralism, dignity, humility, and values were formulated – with no attempt to design one common universal meaning to any of these words.

Outreach, a Learning Community of Women

El-Warsha Theatre Company24, Egypt writes about their project which is part of the New Woman Foundation’s program – Horizons of Art: Workshops of Empowerment for Women

‘Outreach’ is the teaching (and learning) component of El-Warsha’s work. It aims to develop a specific space within local communities where free expression of emotions and feelings, as well as exercise of imagination, partake in the holistic process of development. This space ultimately aims for the emergence of art and women artists within these communities.

The main objective is to unfold women’s capacities to express their inner selves in different ways, using diverse skills in line with their desires. This enables them to participate in taking decisions that concern them directly or indirectly, thereby forging their own lives into that of the country they belong to. In addition, they become aware of their rights as laid down in the Constitution, particularly those related to women and children. A programme based on ‘characters’ focuses on the oscillation between the general and the particular i.e. from women as citizens, to women as individuals with characters drawn from the participant’s own experience or from contemporary fiction stories.

Naguib Goweily, playwright/theatre trainer, used this space to organise discussions around the necessity of art as an expression of the self and of life, around characters, their specificity and difference, the polyphony of voices in life, and the importance of diversity. He based his work on short stories and plays, both Egyptian and international. He structured activities like group writing and re-writing of stories imagined from the perspective of each of the characters involved. He encouraged the transcendence of fixed sexual roles. Women thus played men’s roles.

He discovered, however, that self-expression was hampered. Societies in cities are riddled with ‘taboos’ (sexual, religious, and political) and prejudices (religious, ethnic, and gender) that often lead to a marked degree of self-censorship. He used contemporary literature and cinema, dealing with these issues in Upper Egypt’s society as a means to let these themes emerge for discussion, hoping for a change in attitude. Many of the women are indeed handicapped when it comes to the Arabic language, which has a vernacular expression that is clearly segregated from its literary expression; reading aloud and correcting linguistic mistakes encouraging them to read important Egyptian authors were some of the methods used.

Naguib Goweily writes:

An appropriate way to express my experience is that “the more an area of knowledge expands, the more the grip of authority weakens”. The first meeting was intended for us to get to know each other. Our conversations included our likes in terms of food, colour of dresses etc. I asked what they expect from the project. They replied to know more about theatre, its history, its development etc. I explained that this is what they read in books; hear in lectures or at theatre institutes, etc.

Our project was going to focus on something else. Ours is a space where two ‘parties’ interact in order to share what each one knows, with the sole intention of learning from each other. I insisted that anything that is kept within oneself and not shared with the group would take away the full benefit of what can be learned. The essence of the project is mutual learning and not the transmission of ready-made answers and skills to passive receivers.

24. Directed by Hassan El Geretly who is also a founder of the Company and one of its trainers.
This was the first time I worked with women who are neither artists nor professionals, but just simply women. Over the months, our experiences, both the women’s and mine, gave birth to a lot of improvisation. I started with the assumption that every person has something from which others can learn and that each one of us has a treasure of knowledge. This is how people have learned throughout the ages. It was only after several meetings that things began to unfold and that the girls and women started to express their thoughts and feelings.

One girl commented, “I feel that all that I need to come with is myself as a girl, with all that it means, and to express myself without being embarrassed, and that there is a lot I can do and express…”

Another said, “It helped me deal with people around me, watch them and observe all that is going on and broaden my imagination to include new ways…”

I stressed ‘characters’ in a dramatic way: characteristics of the character, relationships with others, and with the world around, and one’s awareness of oneself and the world. This pushed the discussions wide open in terms of daily life issues, especially those related to women.

In spite of the difficulties that we faced at the beginning, where I felt – at times – like quitting (because it was new and too much for me), we eventually built a beautiful and dynamic relationship. I am not exaggerating when I say that those months were the most important experiments in my personal and artistic life. It was simply dramatic. Our relationship moved from dullness and desperation to one full of excitement, understanding, happiness and liveliness. I surely feel so because the women themselves gained confidence, and there was a high level of seriousness, commitment and desire to change and develop.

One main worry however, is that such experiments are small in number. How does one make them more widespread so as to have a wider impact?

‘Characters’ benefited from the participation of Ahmed Kamal, actor/theatre trainer. He used various exercises such as concentration, easy breathing, basic fitness and other ice-breaking exercises derived from theatre games, as well role-play. There were discussions around how top Egyptian actresses in cinema and theatre create their characters and live with them.

Ahmad Kamal writes:

On my way to El-Menia and Aswan to meet the women I would be working with for several months, my imagination wandered back to school days. I don’t remember ever being asked what I liked or disliked. We never had the chance to express what was going on within us, although that would have formed the first ‘window’ towards liberty and freedom; to let free a feeling that one exists and can change oneself and those around us.

My effort and experience for the past 10 years has been to train actors and actresses. Now I am facing another kind of people: ‘ordinary’ women coming from villages, homes and jobs that are also ‘ordinary’. All of the women in the group grew up with the impact of educational and mass media programmes that usually consist of empty slogans. That awareness made me realize from the very beginning that I am facing a new situation where “characters” are going to be the women themselves or characters created by them

I decided that improvisation, thus, was the main approach. It was both difficult and enjoyable. The difficulty arose from the fact that these ‘ordinary’ women had to stand in front of others and express an idea, a situation, or a character, either with words or with the help of body movement, and the enjoyment arose from the discovery of people’s ability to improvise, to create and to imagine.

Truly, I didn’t expect to see any change, especially at the beginning, and in particular with the Aswan group. With time, however, I noticed that they evolved in their expressions. They started improvising on characters from their own communities. Some situations reflected their awareness of men. Others were full of sarcasm for the corruption that was common in schools and other institutions they were working in.

25. This experiment with the women of Aswan and El-Menia has been documented on video. Please write to El-Warsha, email: elwarsh@starinet.com.eg if you wish to obtain a copy.
Some of the best improvisations related to festivals in their communities: weddings, births, commemorations. But the most beautiful ones related to the roles of marginalized characters in their community, such as the lemonade vendor, a village caller for lost animals, newly engaged couples or young girls forced into undesired marriages, women ditched by their husbands, traditional teachers and so on.

One of the nicest moments was when they were observing me filming the characters they were playing. In short, this experience, using theatre as a means for learning and expression, represents for me a wonderful approach of seeing life with new eyes.

**Stories of young people who “walked their own paths” in life**

As was mentioned in the introduction to Al Jame'ah, people learn and lead lives in thousands of different ways. Apprenticeship is one of them and it is, probably, still the most natural, effective, and real way to learn and to lead a productive and meaningful life. The following are stories of young people from Lebanon, India, and Mexico who left schools by their own decisions to re-live outside the realm of any authority, institution or professional but usually not without support and help from friends.

First, from Lebanon:

The following stories reflect the lives of three young people from Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon with who Al-Jana, a Beirut based organization, has been interacting. See ensuing chapter for further insights on Al-Jana’s experiences as a learning community.

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**I left school because I didn’t agree with the teachers. I had constant troubles with them. My father opened a clothes shop and I joined him. My dream was to be a women’s hairdresser. However, recently I got an opportunity to learn how to repair computers. It gives me the feeling of doing something important in my life and that makes me happy. The difference between now and when I was in school is that I feel much freer now and don’t have to deal with teachers who have so many ‘complexes’. Well, I am now engaged in two things: selling clothes and learning computer maintenance...but the most important thing is that I got rid of school...**

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**I left school because I wasn’t doing well. I always wanted to be a men’s hairdresser. I told my family that and they enrolled me in an institute and now I work in a men’s hair salon. It comforts me to feel that I have a future in this kind of work. The difference between school and this place is that in school they often ill-treated and physically abused me, while here, the shop owner treats me as if I were his younger brother. My desire, in addition to this work, is to learn English.**

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Nabeel Yaseen – 16 years old, Burj El-Barajneh Camp, Lebanon

Usama Abu Salem – 13 years old, Burj El-Barajneh Camp, Lebanon
While in school I was hoping that when I finish I would go to Sibleen – teacher training centre – and become a teacher, but things did not work out that way. Now I am learning how to work in an aluminium shop and hopefully will soon master the art which is different from anything I ever learnt in school.

What I miss and liked when I was in school is playing with my classmates. Now at work, the shop owner keeps screaming at us, calling us names and wants us to lie... However, I have to live with it and what I am looking forward to is learning this profession and hopefully having my own shop in the future.

Diverse spaces are being created to enable such children to walk their own learning and life paths... photography, fine arts and theatre are some of them.

I have selected a few more stories from other parts of the world to illustrate the claim that an increasing number of learners and families are reacting very concretely to the irrelevance of schooling in their lives by designing learning journeys that are more meaningful to them. In addition two films specifically feature such path seekers in Latin America – Nuestros Caminos, Una historia de busquedas – and in India – Walkout, and explore the reasons for their learning choices26. The following are stories from Mexico and India.

Sergio Beltran, Unitierra, Mexico writes:

In Oaxaca children are called ‘muchitos’ (a short form for ‘muchachitos’ which means little boys and girls). Ten years ago the local TV station showed a programme called ‘Muchos Muchitos’ (Many little children). This series dealt with working children and adolescents, some working at home or in the corn fields with their families, while others were in a ‘street situation’. They loved being on TV and gladly shared their life stories in front of the camera, speaking without reservation about their situation. That’s how Jerónimo appeared on the scene, a shoe shiner in the central square of Oaxaca. He soon became the programme star.

He had arrived in Oaxaca with his family when he was four. They left their Mixteca community due to the grinding poverty. Two years later, after his parents and siblings died in an accident that Jerónimo can’t or won’t describe, he was left to be looked after by a family in the neighbourhood. This foster family decided to return to their native community when Jerónimo was eight and he didn’t want to go with them. On the eve of the scheduled departure, he escaped, and ever since has been called a street child. At first he took refuge with friends, from whom he learned what has become his main source of income: shoe shining. Soon he made arrangements with different families, for food and lodging, and he broadened his circle of friends until he found the vocation he loved, that of blacksmith.

He decided to start schooling, not because he thought that he needed it, but in his own words he wanted “to prove that he could do that too” and “so that he would not be called stupid”. He made quick progress, taking one year to complete a two year programme. He should soon complete elementary school. He looks healthy, happy and whole. There are no visible marks of his tragic past. He no longer dreams of visiting his home town or what might remain of a family he can’t quite remember. Full of energy, he celebrates his thirteen years, creating a place for himself in a city he has made his own.

Jeronimo, a thirteen year old shoe shiner, Oaxaca, Mexico in a filmed interview:

“The truth is that I am doing pretty well. Shining shoes here in the plaza I can make all the money I need in a few hours. Then I go with my buddy - the blacksmith - so that I can keep learning more from him. I play with my friends, and I have a great place to hang out at night in good company. The only bad thing is school. It’s so boring and pointless, but I’m going to get my elementary school

Mohammad Al-Shouly – 15 years old, Burj El-Barajneh Camp, Lebanon

26. See chapter on video documentation for further details.
diploma so that people will stop saying things. When I finish, I’m going to hang out more often with the blacksmith. He’s promised that he’ll help me set up my own shop and that’s what I want. I can always decide later where to go from there.”

The following two cases are extracts from Swapathgami, January 2005, a magazine of the Swapathgami network made of individuals who have decided to rise out of institutionalised structures as a positive choice to reclaim control over their own learning and life.

Vinay Futane, India

My father had left city life and decided to return to our village. He has been organic farming for the last 20 years, inspired first by M. Fukuoka’s book One-Straw Revolution, then later by his own experiences. My mother grew up in an ashram with Vinoba Bhave. She never went to school, and instead learned about life, and all of life’s work, in the ashram...

Since I was a child, my whole way of learning had depended on doing. That meant my mistakes were really important. Of course, it was impossible to learn this way in school. When I was young, I thought I would study science after my 10th class, because I would get more chances to do practical things. But, I soon realized that ‘practical’ only meant mixing some chemicals, watching the reaction, writing what happened.

There was really no chance to learn with my hands or use my own mind. Everything was basically done on paper and all the answers were already known. When the time came to do my BSc., they were teaching us about the Himalayan environment – its’ plants, trees, animals – which had absolutely nothing to do with where I was. I wanted to learn more about my local place, to better understand it. So, I walked out of college and dived more seriously into organic farming as an inspiration for life. Now I would be able to learn by doing at every moment… Unlike some of the other boys in my village, who have gone to school, I am not ashamed to do this work. I learn a lot from the people in my village too. There is so much wisdom in them. In school, I studied to get high marks to please someone else. Now when I study, it’s to fulfil my own curiosity… I’ve been working with farmers to collect and save seeds...

Sangeetha Sriram, India

I want to lead a life as much in alignment with my values as possible, with as few conflicts as possible, and make it my message to the world. Like John Holt says, “When you find that you are able to do something, the very fact that you can do it means that anyone else who wants to can also do it.”

I was unable to come to terms with the fact that, in order to be where I am, I had to go through the modern system of schooling (and be ‘qualified’ through standardized tests) that I am so against. I was unable to justify being in a large institution that is supported by a large infrastructure – the strings that come attached with the donors and the institutions they are in turn attached to, all of which I am in disagreement with. And by merely submitting to the inevitability of attaching myself to an institution, so I could access this knowledge, submitting to the reality of the luxury of being heard if I earn the tag of ‘Phd.’, I felt like I would fail in my endeavour to ‘make my life my message’.

27. For more information on the network, please visit www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/walkoutsnetwork.htm
28. Translated from Hindi by Shilpa Jain
The Challenges

Palestinians constitute the largest and the oldest refugee population in modern times – 4 million with an official refugee status. The Palestinian experience in Lebanon, since the uprooting of 1948, has been a human saga of epic proportions. A community without basic civil rights is facing continuous pressure to disperse to new and more distant places and denied even the hope of returning to Palestine.

Despite poverty, unhealthy and unsanitary living conditions, lack of land for agriculture, absence of meaningful learning in schools, the community has been struggling to maintain its vision, spirit and identity.

We have been working with communities to research their rich historical experiences and cultural contributions, building on the inner strengths and the creative problem solving strategies, that have carried Palestinians through circumstances which could be qualified among the worst faced by humankind.

Al-Jana houses a resource centre that provides access to literature, printed and audio visual resources on arts and art education for children, youth, facilitators & artists.

Since 1990 our centre has been facilitating programs that:

- Involve local communities in researching and recording their own experiences.
- Produce active learning resources that reflect the culture and knowledge of local Palestinian communities.
- Engage children and youth in critical research, multimedia work and artistic production on issues of importance to their lives.
- Provide spaces and resources for hands-on learning & creative expression.
- Coordinate cultural & artistic activities, exhibitions and film festivals with local communities & for audiences around the world.
- Pool resources and coordinate the following networks:
  - “Janana: active learning and creative expression” network – 42 NGO centres and libraries working with children and youth.
  - “Learning with music” network of educators engaged with children.
  - “Youth media” network, still in the making.

"We Exist!": Active learning and creative expression among Palestinian refugee communities

Moa’taz Dajani,
Al-Jana, Lebanon

“I wish I were a bird to fly back to my homeland.” Mona, 13 years old

Unique learning paths to create new learning spaces: Unfolding the diversity of learning initiatives
The Al-Jana oral testimony program

Since 1992 Al-Jana has collaborated with Palestinian elders, educators, field workers, children and youth on a campaign to document the experiences of Palestinians, their culture and community history.

Al-Jana’s oral testimony archives contain 500 hours of testimonials: folk songs, folk tales and oral history sourced from Palestinian elders. We collaborate with youth in the research and production of journals, resource packs, films and audio CDs as tools to engage other young people.

This archive is being indexed and digitalized in order to make it more accessible for researchers.

The centre has also published nine issues of Al-Jana – a periodical focusing on Palestinian oral culture and history.

“Our country why have you forsaken us?”* – 140 hours of interviews with 116 Palestinian women and men responding to questions collected from the fourth generation refugee children, focussing on the Palestinian experience between 1947 and 1951 and revolving around concerns that have been ignored by national official history sources.

* A line from a folksong about the uprooting of 1948

Challenges in the oral testimony program

One important challenge in the oral testimony programme has been to encourage elderly refugees to reflect upon their experiences, most often tragic. War, sieges, massacres and economic hardship led many to suffer displacement several times in their lives.

A second equally challenging and essential task has been to turn historical memory into exciting experiential learning activities, with printed and audio – visual resources that can compete with satellite channels, video games and chatting on the internet.
The women’s and children’s republic of Ein Il-Hilweh 1982-1984

A team of women with Al-Jana is undertaking a new project to document the experiences of the women and children of Ein Il-Hilweh refugee camp in Saida, in the South of Lebanon, during the years of 1982-1984. During these years of Israeli occupation, while the men - young and old - were incarcerated in Ansar prison camp, the women and children rebuilt their camp and their lives, and undertook amazing initiatives in community building and solidarity. The interviews have been filmed, and we hope at a later stage to engage whole communities in forums to reminisce, reflect, and discuss issues.

The active learning and creative expression program

This program engages with children, youth & facilitators, libraries and artists who work with them, through networks, workshops, festivals, carnivals, summer camps, and hands-on activities, to promote learning and creativity.

It aims to develop their skills in critical research and creative expression, audio-visual production, and in the organization of cultural events, that will engage other children, such as film festivals, photo and art exhibitions.

While the year 1998 marked the 50th anniversary of the declaration of human rights, the Palestinians in Lebanon were recounting 50 years of dispossession and displacement. In the same year Al-jana began a four year project with 30 children – representing the fourth generation from the Shatilla and Bourj El-Barajneh camps in Beirut - aimed at children’s expressions and acquisition of skills like photo journalism, film-making and book arts.

In 2002, at the end of the project, the children, now matured into youth, organized a festival, to exhibit their photos and released a collective photo-essay book “I wish I were a bird”. The festival included three films made by the children as well, all of which have received international recognition.

In the introduction to their book they wrote:

“We are making this book to demonstrate our existence and to show to the world how we live in camps. No one cares about listening to children. We listened to them. We also worked with the elders, to ensure we don’t forget our homeland. We decided ourselves to do this work.”

The pedagogical frame work for this programme build on:

- The insights and methods of the Brazilian educator Paolo Freire on empowerment and education.
- The growing use of "photo-voice" (photos that voice people’s concerns about their lives and rights).
- The importance of learner-generated materials as empowering products that position participants as makers of culture and change agents.
"I wish I were a bird" unfolded into the young film makers program: Children and youth make animation, documentary and feature films. They also organise a bi-annual film festival in Beirut which features films made by or with children and youth worldwide. The children select the films themselves, write reviews in special publications to be distributed during the festival and help in the general organisation. This festival also includes animation film-making workshops.29

The young film makers program is further unfolding into a youth media network that will provide training and permanent multimedia studio and mobile facilities to youth in camps throughout Lebanon.

Program with walk-outs, walk-ons

During the summer camp of 2004, the Janana campaign engaged on a new track – working with school-leavers. Network members have been struggling to cope with growing numbers of such children. We invited friends from India to share their experience with similar children in India.

During this camp participants engaged in a process to discover stereotypes, practices and obstacles that hinder self-realization in life. Invited to contemplate on their strengths, learn to discover their vision of life and transcend the obstacles in order to realise it – a process that Shikshantar, an Indian based organization, calls “walking-out” and “walking-on”. Participants also focused on how to work with youth on critical media awareness and community media, tools that school leavers can use in advocating their issues. These workshops enriched the on-going programs for school-leavers.

Janana network members are now looking for ways to engage school leaving youth to share their stories and experiences creatively. An Australian volunteer is working on a photo-voice project with a group of such children in Mar Elias camp. Another Australian volunteer sculptor will soon begin on a project in Bourj El Barajneh camp to engage youth in making murals and installations in public spaces, using locally found materials – Creation of animation films with junk that children are recycling is an initiative for the near future.

Next year we hope to start a forum theatre project where young school leavers will engage with their community (parents, children of the camp, teachers, NGOs) in scenarios that stimulate community dialogue and action.

Al-Jana has been enriched over the years by cooperation and networking with the Arab Education Forum, Arab Resource Collective, Shikshantar, Arab Theatre Training Center, and recently Learning societies network & CISP.

29. We appreciate your suggestions of films from your communities for a future film festival. Please contact us at arcpa@cyberia.net.lb For more information, check our website www.Al-Jana.com
This article presents a collection of stories and reflections around a Learning Centre called ‘Kufunda Village’ in Zimbabwe. It is a contribution to the thinking around development, community building and perhaps even to new ways of working with people, groups and communities.

We begin by taking a look back at the origins of Kufunda Village and continue with a brief outline of the tangible reality of the village today. We then pose the question that informs the rest of the paper, namely:

What does it take to support people in reclaiming their sense of wealth and of possibility, and in that beginning to forge their own learning paths towards a more nourishing and sustaining way of life?

Kufunda’s origins

This story begins three to four years ago with a dream and vision of mine.

We have a small farm of 327 acres, 23 km south of Harare, which we bought in 1984 when our family moved to Zimbabwe. On it we grow maize and groundnuts, cabbages and seedlings for sale, as well as milk for ourselves and the people in the surrounding area. On it my mother, sister and I hold a vision of something more – of a place where we do things with and for the people of Zimbabwe.

My mother’s vision was of primary education, my sister’s of a place of creativity, arts, music and crafts. Mine was of a learning community of people from across the country – and beyond – coming together to learn about different ways of living and being that sustain and nourish people’s physical, mental and spiritual needs. Our dreams intertwined, and I hoped to see them co-exist on the farm.

I was born in Kenya to a Danish father and a Zimbabwean mother. I grew up in Denmark and our family moved to Zimbabwe when I was 12. Although I returned to Denmark soon thereafter – at 16 – to continue my education, Zimbabwe has been home since those early teen years. I returned to Zimbabwe in September 2001. I was coming home to start what has today become Kufunda.

Instead of telling my full life story, I would rather share with you the questions I am carrying at this point in my journey. I like to think of those questions as the edge of my learning, where new insights and knowledge is in the process of being created, shaped, moulded – but where I am still unclear and with an eagerness to find clarity and insight.

30. The author can be contacted at marianne@kufunda.org. For the complete story, please refer to the Non Formal Education webpage of the UNESCO Literacy portal www.unesco.org/education/literacy.
There are ways of doing things that are in tune with Life and ways that aren’t. In my experience there are processes of interacting with others, of managing organizations, of working with nature – that are life-affirming, and there are processes that stifle and limit life. I am on the constant look out for those processes, practices and principles that support and nourish life, creativity, community, generosity. And I am finding them in practices that are democratic, inclusive, that value diversity and make space for spirit.

Creating good learning space

What does it take to open up a powerful learning space? It is my experience that amazing things can happen when people get together to listen to each other, learn from and with each other and co-create something. How can we prepare the ground such that people truly do open up, such that they step in as active curious learners and not passive receivers?

The heart of Co-creation

What does it take, as a leader of any sort, to enable true co-creation to occur? The question is not only in relation to Kufunda as an organization – I carry it across in my work with community organisers. What does it mean for a rural group or community to be in an equal co-creative relationship? Is it simply a fine idea from Denmark, bound to fail in the hot arid soil of rural Zimbabwe?

Hosting hosts

We have realised through our work at Kufunda and our founding idea that we cannot come laden with solutions, but that together with the people in a community we can come up with the best ways forward. The challenge, or the next level of this work, is to learn how to support the community organisers with whom we are working, to enable them to become hosts of shared learning in their communities; hosts of collective problem-solving.

I have been inspired by Grundtvig31, Tagore32 and Gandhi. As I started Kufunda, I envisioned:

- a centre which would regularly bring together community organisers from across Zimbabwe to learn from each other; to deepen their understanding of their situation by becoming more conscious of unconscious assumptions that may hold them back (both inherited and cultural); and how they can work with those.
- a space to support young disadvantaged people who have not managed to finalise their formal education. It was to be a place to help them grow more fully into themselves and who they are; to help them figure out what they want from life, and how to get there.
- a centre in which simplicity and self-sustainability are key. Being in tune with nature. “In such a place education necessarily becomes the preparation for the complete life of man, which can only be possible by living that life, through knowledge and service, enjoyment and creative work.”33

My desire, in setting out, was to challenge inherited notions of success and development (from colonialism and the west) and to work with rural Zimbabweans to recover knowledge and insights from their own culture. Inspired by Gandhi, I believe that the absence of the British does not constitute independence (which officially Zimbabwe gained in 1980). Rather independence, or freedom, is the recovery of the self and of civilisation in Zimbabwe.

31. A Danish priest who took it upon himself to help the youth of the farming population of Denmark 130 years ago. To him, the objective was not so much about teaching better farming methods, but igniting a spark in each person – of personal pride, of a sense of place in history, of self-confidence built on knowing who one is and where one comes from. It was the beginning of the folk highschool movement, which is still strong in Denmark and now extends beyond the farming population. This movement has also been a key component in shifting the quality and creativity of Danish farming.

32. An Indian philosopher to whom the purpose of human life was the realisation of the infinite self – to live a life in which the individual is open and dedicated to a larger universe. This did not mean sacrificing individuality to the collectiver but, on the contrary, developing one-self as fully as possible in order to participate generously in one’s community and society.

33. Tagore, R 1931, (p.166), The Religion of Man, Beacon Press, Boston.
Three and a half years later. Kufunda Village has become a reality. Much of the above is being lived out, played and experimented with. Kufunda is a learning village which seeks to support people and communities in discovering and recovering practices and social systems that actually work for them. What ‘that actually work for them’ means, is part of what this paper is about.

Let me offer a brief description of Kufunda and its’ work:

Our starting point is that all the communities we work with are unique and special. We work with their current wealth, however limited it may seem. Thus, we start from a place of wealth, and ‘sufficiency’, instead of that of poverty and scarcity. Recognizing that most of the people are deeply connected to their villages and communities, we focus on helping each community expand its sense of what is possible.

We don’t come into a community to fix a problem. We empower and support people to develop their leadership potential and capacities to solve their own problems in their own ways.

Through our work with a community, we have typically focused on:

- Broad-based learning related to the support of sustainable communities;
- Re-imagining their community together and
- Developing basic action plans and projects to move towards their new vision for the future.

But although the community is central to our work, we recognize that we are working with individuals. We take the time for storytelling, to enable people to get to know each other more deeply, to listen to – and integrate – their fears and concerns, dreams and hopes, as a way of moving towards something that is collective.

The realisation of what is possible when we come together creates a momentum that can go beyond any initial project, be it on sanitation, agriculture or reforestation. Let me share a few examples.

- The group in Zvimba has put a special emphasis on coming together around a collective compost toilet project. They have so far built 63 toilets in the community, involving the local headmen, chief and primary and secondary schools. They are running a community garden project together as a model for what is possible without using expensive chemical fertilisers and pesticides.
- In Rusape, two pre-schools have been created. A knitting school has also been launched for women in the community. The nursery project now has over 5000 trees, a mix between exotic fruit trees for sale and indigenous trees for reforestation. The possibility of starting a community currency for the area is being explored.

In addition to practical outcomes, the importance of working together is expressed time and time again in each of these communities.

“I have learnt that we need to share the little that we have and that, working in a team, we can have a better tomorrow.” Community organizer from Zvimba

“I used to be selfish. I only wanted to work for myself. Now I am experiencing the benefit of working together.” Aquiline Makorovodo

Allow me to introduce a few people you will get to know better over the next few pages.

Anna Marunda, from Rusape, is a forty six year old widow. She lives on her late husband’s monthly pension of $2, but must pay $20 every three months for her children’s school fees. In the past year, Anna has set up a women’s crochet cooperative. She also recently started teaching knitting to women in her area, has built her own compost toilet and is teaching others how to build their own. Lastly, she runs an AIDS dialogue group and provides home care for AIDS patients.
Dumisani, from Mhondoro, is a single mother. Her husband left her when she was unable to bear him a son. She returned to him a year later and finally bore him a son. However he had married a second wife and after a while she decided that she did not wish to live with him and a second woman. She is spearheading the compost toilet project in Mhondoro, as well as helping to organise the community to come together in more projects to improve their situation. She has also created a small sewing group and is practicing organic gardening, learnt at Kufunda. She sells her produce on the local market as a way to complement her income.

Sikhethiwe Mlotsha, on the left, is a young mother of 23. She joined the very first youth programme at Kufunda. Shortly after, she joined the team living at Kufunda to further develop our work with compost toilets, as well as organic farming.

Tsitsi Maruza, on the right, is also a widow, at 34. Her husband died from cancer after being sick for five years. Towards the end of his illness, nursing him became her full-time job. Once he had passed away, this small feisty woman became a full-time member of the team. Her area of work is organic gardening, as well as all the logistics connected to running the various programmes.

The others include: Silas Lusias, who is a co-facilitator at Kufunda, with a particular passion for organic gardening and farming; Esther Jena and Shane Chirumiko, early youth programme participants; Chido Kapenzi – a health care worker from Zvimba, and part of the Zvimba community we work with; and finally Fidelis Maruza and Tichaona Murungweni who have been through our programme and have subsequently joined the Kufunda team – both in the building team, working with continuing to develop Kufunda using indigenous and eco-friendly building methods.

What are we learning?

The themes that have emerged from our conversations, and which we will describe in greater detail below, are:

i) Telling our story
ii) Appreciating what ‘is’
iii) Being truthful about what isn’t
iv) Removing money from the pedestal upon which we have placed it
v) Paying attention to the needs of others
vi) Striving for village self-reliance
vii) Taking time to ‘still’ the mind
viii) Cultivating the community commons
i) Telling our story

Initially it was a surprise to me that the story is more important than the training taking place. But when the stories go deep, the learning flows.

Anna first came to Kufunda in February 2003 for our first community organisers programme. The change that has occurred in Anna’s life since then is remarkable. It seems that it began with a shift in perspective. A shift and realisation, more importantly, in her view of herself. “I thought that because I was one of the poorest people in my community I had no role to play. At Kufunda, I learned that each one of us has something special to give. I used to think that because I had no cell phone... I could not mix with wealthier people.”

Anna said that when she began to value herself, she found the courage to spearhead initiatives which she had previously felt unable to do as a simple poor woman. And she is very clear that it was her first two-week experience at Kufunda that marked the beginning of this shift, though it was affirmed and accentuated by the response she received in her community when she began to show initiative and leadership.

During the first two days, the community organisers programme that Anna was a participant in, concentrated on an exercise we call the tree of life. Departing from the metaphor of a tree, participants spend two full days telling their story. From the roots (ancestors and grandparents who have influenced their lives), to the trunk (their life story, often one full of hardship), to the fruits (the gifts and talents they have) and the leaves (their dreams for themselves and their family).

Those two days are always magic. The journey from the roots to the fruits is always one of hardship and suffering. Parents dying early, children passing away from AIDS, unable to finish school, getting caught up in the political drama unfolding in our country at this time. Whatever the story, almost everyone has a hard tale to tell.

If we stopped here, we would know that we were not alone in our suffering, but that would be about it. The move further up the tree to the gifts shows how people have mostly somehow managed to take their suffering and turn it into something rich: the women’s ability to listen to and counsel others; the youth’s ability to write poetry describing her life; the talent of nursing and caring for the sick; the ethic of hard work and it goes on.

ii) Appreciating what ‘is’

I often see people shift enormously in those few days of storytelling, visibly straightening up in their posture as they tell their story from different angles and perspectives.

From being a poor person, laden with problems, they begin to pay attention to, and appreciate, the gifts and qualities they already carry within them. Silas referred very clearly to it in our conversation: “Realising who you are... Being poor means you want to be someone, but then you’re not looking at what’s here; who you are.”

Focusing on ‘what is not’ will only cause us to increase our sense of inadequacy. As we invite people to focus on what is working – in every community and person there is something that works – we are thus inviting them to expand their sense of wealth and possibility.

Dumi reflects, “I am realizing that giving can be done in many ways. In the form of money, sharing ideas, natural resources. In fact we used to think that natural resources were not good enough to share. Offering mangai (a traditional food) was not good enough.

Assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry

- In every community something works.
- What we focus on becomes our reality.
- Reality is created in the moment. – there is more than one reality.
- The act of asking questions influences the community in some way.
- People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.
- If we carry forward parts of the past, they should be the best parts.
I did not know that mangai is actually better than the white bread and jam we choose to serve visitors instead. We did not know that our traditional foods have all the nutrients. We’re forgetting our own foods. Now we’re realizing that we should go back to our roots. Not just with food."

I asked where this conviction might have come from. The answer was that those with money don’t choose them and so what can be bought must surely be better than what is grown at home.

Sikhethiwe thinks aloud “…our own type of food is an example of our poverty. Poor people usually eat traditional food. The rich can buy processed foods. To show that we have something, and out of respect for our visitors, we end up buying expensive and less nutritious foods."

This is a good example of the loss of self that has occurred. The shift in the people we work with, those who have reclaimed pride in their mangai, their local herbs, their community, and their own culture, may have come partly through the questions – following the very simple but potent appreciative approach – guiding them to uncover specifically the wealth, treasures and wisdom that they do have as individuals and communities.

iii) Being truthful about what isn’t…

Appreciating the good is central. And yet it is not an excuse to cover up that which is not working. For Anna having the space to speak about her pain was just as valuable as the practice of looking at what she had to offer the world: “You may teach many things, but if people are full of problems they are not able to learn.”

It has been my experience that many people keep their pain, problems and sorrows to themselves, wishing not to burden others with them. They may live in a collective and communal culture, but it is so much easier to share the joy and laughter than that which is not so beautiful and light.

I remember one circle at Kufunda. It was a small group, mainly women, mainly widows. Through the conversations of the days before, it had become clear that people were under more financial stress than normal after the government had more than tripled school fees in an attempt to keep up with inflation. I forget the exact question I asked. It was something like this: “What is your situation and what are your concerns?” It turned into a circle of grief and tears. What struck me most was that, afterwards, people expressed deep surprise that they were not alone in their suffering. It was perhaps a unique circle in the way that it opened up this collective grief. But the on-going practice of sharing what is in our heart and minds seems to be an important release for many people.

The conversation was generative in that it spurred us to set up an educational fund to support the widows and orphans. I believe that, even if we had not moved into problem – solving mode from the conversation, the process of sharing in itself brought a significant level of release and thus healing. Dumisani also spoke highly of the freedom that comes from no longer bottling things up and keeping them to herself. “I would conceal from the very person who might help. And yet after you share something troubling you in the circle or with a friend, you feel relieved.”

Anna takes the thread one step further as she reflects on the power of speaking up, even when it might make others uncomfortable. Honesty about our experience in our community is essential, “It pains me to see how we are living in this country. The government says everything is fine, but that is not true. People can’t speak out. They are beaten up. But we need to speak.”

Culturally, we are all supposed to be ‘fine.’ We are not supposed to burden people with our grievances, and yet the foundation for a healthy community must surely be healthy people. I return to Anna’s comment “You may teach many things, but if people are full of problems they are not able to learn.”

And so it has gradually become clearer to us that when we hear our stories and have the space to share both pain and hope, anguish and joy, we nurture and fuel the energy to move forward. However, we still need to deepen our learning and practice of these processes.

It has become such an ingrained habit to focus on what we lack, instead of what we have. We also tend to keep to ourselves the things that are most burdening us, though they may be consuming us.
iv) Removing money from the pedestal upon which we have placed it

“We are learning to work together again, play, learn and simply be. To join in community again. Such power is available as we learn this and move into it. As we support each other, we grow stronger as a group and as individuals. As we recognize that we each have something of value to offer the community, our sense of self-worth grows and our process of unfolding is just like a flower.”

My Journal, August, 2003

In our questions to people about their learning paths and their relationship to Kufunda, another aspect emerges very strongly - the realisation that money and material things are not in fact the most important aspects of life.

Looking back at her young life, Sikhethiwe shares how money was central to her concerns.

“When I was at school it was a wonderful life. But when you grow up you have to be working. To make money. After school I was always worried about what to do to make more money... I don’t even have enough for myself...I worry about my baby’s life. If things continue to be hard, am I going to be able to send him to school?....”

But though things continue to be hard, Sikhethiwe has changed fundamentally in her relationship to money. “...What I have learned in the last few years at Kufunda is that even though money is important, it is not all. Yes we need money for clothes, for food and so on. But it is not as important as yourself. You have to love yourself and the way you are first, not just rush for how you can get money.”

Sikhethiwe’s thoughts reflect sentiments that many others have shared with us. That the experience of fun, love, community, doing what we love, being engaged in meaningful pursuit, that these bring an experience of happiness. In the midst of the same poverty, an experience of happiness is a strong reminder to what really matters, and money – while necessary – is not the only factor in bringing on joy and meaning.

“When we were doing the course, there was time to have fun. Doing different exercises, sharing stories with other people – that all made me realize that money was not all that important. I was happy...”

Sikhethiwe is speaking of her realization – shared with many others – that money isn’t everything and that happiness isn’t purely financial. Tracing the source of this realization takes us to being together with others, being in relationships – whether that be through circle, in projects, in exercise, in work or play. As we loose our intense focus and worry about money, we can work with it in a more detached and perhaps healthier way.

Aquiline no longer focuses on money and as a result, everything has changed. Her business is picking up, she is doing better than before and she believes that relaxing around the issue was a key factor.

“I used to worry a lot: Where am I going to get this, how am I going to do that – Now I can focus on just doing my work. The worry used to stop me. If it was really bad, I could just sit at home, too worried to do anything.”

What I read in these stories is the gradual realization that you can be happy and do things without lots of money. This allows us to disentangle ourselves somewhat from the grip that money holds on us, which is when we find the space to do more, even with little.

Dumi continues,

“Before Kufunda I just wanted something that would benefit me in my own life. Now I feel like I am a part of the community. You yourself are responsible for improving your community. I used...”
to think that if we got some donors we could improve. Not us by ourselves. But we actually can. I see that now."

Sometimes we’re afraid we won’t measure up to others. Fidelis’ main learning from the past years of involvement with Kufunda seems to have been not to compare himself to others but to learn to trust himself.

Even if he has less than others, Fidelis says, “People judge you based on what they see. Sometimes because you don’t have money they don’t recognize you. I have learnt that the greatest contribution is to give them love. And to be an example, to show people that I believe in myself.” He smiles. “In our group there were lots of people who were educated. At the start I was feeling very insecure. After working together for a month I realized that we might be different, but that was not the same as some being better. Some were good at music, some at carpentry, some at farming… different, not better.”

v) Paying attention to the needs of others

Poor though I may be, others have greater needs than me…

An important part of that shift is also to realise that others are suffering as much, if not more, than ourselves. From that point, we do have something to offer and the focus shifts on how we can help, which is a more generous place to operate from.

Sikhethiwe spoke about how the deeper sharing that happens in the circle at Kufunda was a real eye opener for her in terms of how others had greater needs than her. “When you’re with other people sharing stories, sometimes when people share their problems, you realize that some people have problems worse than yours. You can learn something from others.” Dumi confirms: “Being with others brings comfort, but it also brings a realization that others are suffering more than me.”

From a place of scarcity to a realisation that you are needed by others in your community – I don’t think we can under-estimate the power that can be accessed in this shift. In development programmes, all the poor are seen as poor – needing help. We choose to see what they have to give and in the process that means connecting more deeply as human beings and discovering that they have more than they were aware of.

People are still struggling. They are still concerned about lack of material belongings and yet there is a shift happening here – releasing energy and possibilities and removing the focus on what is not.

vi) Striving for Village Self-reliance

One of the exciting trends, as far as I am concerned, is people realising that they need to become self-reliant and that the migration to cities might no longer be their best option34.

Dumi says, “I am seeing some of the children out there finish their O levels without a job to go to. The only way they can survive is to return to their rural area and start their own projects, working with their hands. Kufunda is reminding us that it is not bad to work with our hands. It teaches us to rely on what we have.”

There is still a mentality surrounding which types of work are looked favourably upon, and those which are not. The simple projects that we support are not always looked upon with excitement. But they are simple and they allow a community to go a little further in caring for itself. Instead of having to buy synthetic jam and white bread, they can produce cheaper and healthier local produce.

34. Unemployment in Zimbabwe is supposedly at 70%.
Dumi continues, “First people weren’t interested in learning in the community. Now it has changed. We are doing different projects together: peanut butter, sewing, bee keeping. Now the question is how to expand and do more together.”

vii) Time to ‘still’ the mind: Letting go and letting come

Meditation, as we practice it at Kufunda, is simply the act of observing your incoming and outgoing breath, and your bodily sensations, often changing in response to the stream of thoughts that come and go. We learn to watch ourselves with equanimity and over time begin to realize that change is the only constant. Being attached to one sensation over another becomes a futile exercise as it will also change. We have introduced meditation at Kufunda as a voluntary practice each morning. Last year we hosted our first 10-day retreat to teach the basics of meditation.

Aquiline is a widow of 49. She was married to a policeman who died suddenly in 1984 after a few days of serious illness. “I thought my world had fallen down. Where would I get my living? I was getting everything from him.” She developed ulcers in 1986, an outcome of the sudden stress of having to look after herself and their 3 children. She has only recently recovered.

She very clearly relates her improvement to the practice of meditation: “Meditation has cooled my heart. I always thought too much…I was an unhappy person. Now I feel a little more like a free person, meditation clears my mind. I have learned how to see reality as it is. And then to simply face things...”

Others speak similarly about the subtle power of the on-going practice of meditation: “Meditation has changed me. I don’t react in the moment so much any more. I give myself time to think. I used to be quite harsh in my speech. I feel like I have become calmer.” Sikhethiwe

“I have learned the importance of time alone. Breathing in and out helps me to relax, and to reduce stress. I used to have a lot of headaches. The frequency has changed... I contribute that to meditation.” Silas

“You can’t keep carrying your problems. Through meditation, and my ability to share my worries with others, I have become more at ease.” Anna

But even if it is not meditation per se, the practice of taking reflective quiet time-out has resonance with many people here.

In a culture that does not have much space for time alone, the way in which meditation appeals deeply to many of the people we work with, especially the older women, initially surprised me. Now it makes sense.

What has arisen through the conversations on meditation is how strongly it has relieved the worries and concerns that people used to carry. It seems to link to the other emergent theme of not focusing so intently on that which is not working.

Unlike in the appreciative approach, where focus is on what we have, meditation simply observes and pays attention to what is – regardless of whether it is good or bad. In holding it all lightly in the mind through meditation, its’ hold on us is weakened. Perhaps this is why Aquiline feels that her business is better now, though nothing has really changed, except that she no longer worries so much. This is an area which I feel, needs more research.

Suffice it to say that it is a key component of our work, and of what we are discovering about it takes to build healthy community.
viii) Cultivating the community commons

The Circle

Four Agreements for Circle:

1. Listen without judgement (slow down and listen)
2. Whatever is said in circle remains in circle
3. Offer what you can and ask for what you need
4. Silence is also part of the conversation

Three principles serve as a foundation for the governance of the circle. These principles are:

5. Leadership rotates among all circle members.
6. Responsibility is shared for the quality of experience.
7. People place ultimate reliance on inspiration (or spirit), rather than on any personal agenda

“The circle – we were brought up there. Round the fire was where conversation took place. Every evening we would sit around the fire, and talk.” Silas

Every time we ask the question of what has made our community work, or what has been a key to learning, the circle comes up. And the circle is indeed a key part of the Kufunda ground perhaps because it is a part of the traditional culture.

The intention behind the circle is as important as the practice of meeting in the circle itself. A core set of intentions at Kufunda are related to hosting the space and conversation where everyone feels included, where each voice is treasured, where there is deep respect for each person and each contribution, and where we actively seek to nurture our ability to listen more fully and less judgementally.

I have found the circle to be a place that can hold and nurture these intentions among a group of people who are in community together.

A circle is not an event. It is a process. During our programme, we meet in circle each morning for a check-in. During our everyday life at Kufunda, we meet in circle once a week.

I have made a clumsy attempt at a distinction:

Container

The circle is an important container for us at Kufunda. We are gradually learning about the power that can be contained and nurtured in the circle. It holds the collective intention of a group or community. As such it is where we can bring our problems, ideas and whatever else it feels necessary to bring to the group.

“All this was done in the circle and the circle was considered sacred. This thing about considering something sacred was really important to be able to speak and share.” Shane

As Shane explains, the circle is surrounded by a sense of the sacred in our gathering together as human beings. And in fact, many Kufundees speak of it as the sacred circle. That immediately brings an important level of depth and care in how the circle is held. The way we have bounded the experience of the circle itself, shifts the energy and the attention of the group. Two aspects of the circle support this, making it a special place to come together:

“People place ultimate reliance on inspiration” is how Christina Baldwin, author of *Calling the Circle* describes it. What that means to us is to hold a shared sense of purpose at the centre. We spend time at the beginning of any programme to explore and craft our purpose together.

We craft our principles or agreements together, which hold the circle, and our community, even if it is only for a two week programme.

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35. Baldwin, C 1998 edition, *Calling the Circle – The first and future culture*, Bantam Books
With these key elements, the circle helps us consciously commit as a group, to strive for a culture of compassion and wisdom.

The results, so far, have been wonderful and refreshing. We have heard men express intense surprise at how much they have been able to learn through honest conversation with women (in the Shona system men and women often confer separately) and of elders being surprised at how much they have been able to learn with and from youth in the circle.

As you can see our circles may differ from how things would be done if they were done in the traditional way and yet we open the space for the community to co-create their agreements for how they wish to be together, and for where they wish to place the emphasis of their collective learning. When going through this consciously, as opposed to just continuing with the status quo, the principles of equality, respect and support for each other almost always get mentioned as important to the group. And then the practice begins.

Can we live it?

Conflicts do occur. The circle can be seen as a safety net. It does not prevent us from falling, but it gives us somewhere to land. I recall several incidents where the strength of our container was challenged, and as we lived our way through it, it strengthened the group.

**Presence**

The quality of presence that the circle brings to us in the moment is as important.

I struggled with what to place first in my narrative, ‘the presence’ or the ‘container’, as each feeds the other. The container is that much stronger because of the quality of presence in the moment. The circle – with its’ intentions, principles, the talking piece, the attention to silence as a part of the conversation – it deeply grounds the group.

I have seen how it can – though it doesn’t always happen – bring each person to speak from a deeper, fuller, more connected place. It makes each person be extra careful and conscious of talking about things that can contribute to the group as a whole, not simply more words. It also supports listening and meeting from the heart. During my years of working at Kufunda and of working with the circle, I have found that the circle helps people access a quality of presence and realness in their interactions with each other.

The talking piece, and the moment of silence, which we usually open the circle with, slow things down. The quality of quiet brings with it an additional openness, listening and presence. “The moment of silence at the beginning of the morning circle was so important to me, it brings my mind together… It helped me to listen without judgement… It gives me time to think what I want to do, to start listening to my heart.” Different Voices

Of course it is not always perfect. A circle can be dead or it can be too slow. But when it is held with care, it can unfold and support a group to be truly together. It can support a group to think together. Most importantly, it enables people to feel like they are not alone, when they truly join a circle of peers.

Through Gandhi I am reminded of the incredible power of truth and goodness. That which is good and right will inspire and touch people’s hearts and guide their actions. Some may disagree with me, but this is what I choose to believe and my beliefs are being affirmed as I continue this work.

**What are we learning?**

Our opening question was: *How can we work with people in support – not of development per se, but – of their reclaiming their sense of wealth and of possibility, and in that beginning to forge their own learning paths towards a more nourishing and sustaining way of life?*

It is clear to me that there is much to be learned from our methods of working with people. I will try to outline in brief a summary of all that the journey has taught me:

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In the beginning is the meeting

How we meet people determines everything else. It appears to be so obvious that I hesitate to speak about it for fear of coming across as condescending. Do we meet people assuming the best we can about them? Do we meet each person curious about the miracle of a human being that we are about to connect with? Or do we meet a poor person that we are about to help? When we meet the miracle, the unique woman, the mystery of the youth, or the depth of the elder, however poor materially, then those aspects of people respond to us. There is so much more to most people than we often allow ourselves to experience.

We need to acknowledge what is both good and bad - and then choose consciously what we move forward with.

When we started Kufunda, the desire to bring Appreciative Inquiry to life here was strong. However sometimes Appreciative Inquiry can focus so entirely on the good, to the detriment of a full view of a situation. What has become clear to us is that when we bring in an appreciative approach it needs to go hand-in-hand with releasing that which has been painful, or that which feels limiting. Only being allowed to speak of the good, can leave us with a gnawing feeling of not being fully truthful about what is. We need to both acknowledge and express the pain, and to embrace and own the beauty. In this, we can choose what no longer serves us, which we wish to let go of, and what we wish to step into more fully and move forward with. A friend and trustee of the village proposes the idea of Authentic Inquiry as opposed to simply Appreciative inquiry, making space for the whole – shadow or light.

Great energy is released when we stop focusing on what we don’t have; when we stop operating from a place of fearful scarcity.

What has struck me most is just how much seems to be released when people stop focusing on what they lack. Let us look at what we do have and what opportunity for movement is available to us with that. We always have choice and we always have something to give.

In fact the greatest shift seems to occur when people see themselves as being needed by others – the orphans, those poorer than themselves, those who don’t know what is possible with organic fertiliser and so on. Then new reservoirs are discovered – be it in the form of knowledge or in kind – our sense of self shifts until we are no longer ‘a poor person.’ We are no longer a victim, but an agent – and often a positive force - in our own life and in the lives of those around us.

There is happiness – and support – available to us in community

We can be happy without material wealth. This was my experience from when I was younger spending time with my rural grandparents. It was my hope in returning from Denmark to set up Kufunda. And now it has become my experience again through our work with community organisers from different parts of the country.

There is pain and stress in poverty and in not knowing where the money for next terms school fees will come from. Increasingly the reaction, in a monetary economy, has been towards contraction, hoarding, looking out for oneself first, dropping out of Nhimbe (community work) and so on. What I feel we are relearning here, together, is the relief, strength and happiness that are available to us when we come back to more traditional ways of working together. Mushandira Pamwe. And in our togetherness we can find the happiness that is most readily available in the community and in relationships - working together in the fields, celebrations when we harvest the fruits of our work, shared worship, preparing food. In community, these can bring us a simple but deep reaching sense of belonging and joy. What if we could acknowledge it as a more central aspect of so-called ‘development.’ The richness that community can offer? I am convinced that there is so much wealth and value in learning to harness the creativity and spirit of the collective that we have yet to truly discover.

We need basic structures and principles to hold the container of our togetherness

As I have seen the Kufunda community grow, this is the strongest and deepest lesson that I have learned. As we have had to protect and nurture our togetherness, our team – together – we have grown. When it was just me imposing my idea of collective leadership and what a learning community was
meant to be, there was something that wasn’t quite right. Now as we work at it together, it is a lot more messy and quite unpredictable. But it is also more alive and vibrant.

There is a model of the Chaordic Path put forward by Dee Hock\[37\] which I increasingly see as an important part of this work. The word Chaordic is created by the marriage between chaos and order and the idea is that there is a field on the edge of chaos with just enough order. Not too much order, which is on the side of control, and with not too much of chaos, which can simply lead to despair. In this field, creativity and innovation can occur. It is where we can invite in collective intelligence. But to go there, we need to be willing to relinquish our control of a set outcome, or a set of ways, and to welcome surprise.

It is a path that I feel we are learning to walk. Sometimes I do slip back into a place of too much control, as do some of our community organisers. However we are still learning to understand what basic structures and principles create the required level of order, which is neither limiting nor too little, but rather generative.

And so we come to the end of a journey.

We have pulled out some key themes in our insights of how we can work with people in support of their reclaiming their sense of wealth and possibility.

• We have learned about honouring each other, looking for the wonder in each person;
• We have learned about the need to become more aware of the stories we choose to tell about ourselves and our communities, and how we, in that process, need to both give voice to, and then release that which is burdening us, and to learn to embrace and expand that which works;
• We have learned about that which is available to us when we stop focusing on what we don’t have, and begin to work with what we do have;
• We have learned about what is available to us when we come back to working in community;
• We are learning about the skill and the art of working in community.

And we continue to be in learning around all of these.

In going forward, our own most burning questions revolve around how to support people to own and host this process of empowerment themselves.

Aquiline’s journey through Kufunda

Aquiline was facing the chaotic task of picking up her life after her husband’s death. Her mother suggested that she use his pension to buy a sewing machine with which she could make a living. She has been sewing ever since. When I tried to understand what Kufunda had done for her, Aquiline responded:

“Before Kufunda I was not really serious about what I was doing. I thought I was, but now I see that I was not. I tried to do budgeting and accounts, but not well enough. I was a little bit stuck. I also simply waited for the customers to come to me. In 2000 I was doing this alone. The local school asked me to make the traditional outfits for the dance group. I then started working with my mother and a third woman.

I came back from Kufunda with the idea that working with others is good. I started hunting for women who have sewing machines. Then I realized I could work with, and even teach, those who don’t. We are now 15 women working together. Some of them only do the tucking and gathering. I and a few others do the sewing.

At first I only thought about myself. I did not think about the others. I just kept thinking of the money. I was the one who landed the contracts, so I did not want to share. I realized that that was not actually fair. Those doing tucking and gatherings were also contributing. So I suggested that we took an equal share. They were all surprised. From then on, I became more serious about training them.

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We are one. We are still starting so we don’t have so much yet, but I am changed. I have been trained many times before (Red Cross, Sisters of mercy, adult literacy campaigns) but I have never been touched so deeply as I have by my experience at Kufunda. The other experiences did not change me as a human being. This has. Now, when I come across the sick – I really worry about them and wonder how to help them?

The last few months have been hard. In August I lost the boy I was looking after [an orphaned nephew]. In October I lost my older brother, who was always the one who helped me and my mother when we needed extra support. Throughout these hardships, I kept coming back to Kufunda. I feel at home there. But most importantly I have cooled down. Kufunda has taught me to take everything as it is. To be myself. I don’t cry anymore. I see things as they are, receive them and then respond to them as best as I can.”

**References:**

2) Hock, D, 1999, *Birth of the Chaordic Age*, Berrett Koehler
The creation of primary schools in the Andes during the 20th century took place during three periods. The first period dates from the colonial era (Macera 1990: 45-49) and the beginning of the Republican era (first half of the 19th century) and remained fairly unchanged – in spite of the 1823 Constitution and the laws passed in 1850 during the period of General Ramón Castilla (1797-1867) – until the end of World War II.

During this period, schools were created in rural indigenous communities throughout the Andean highlands, representing a possibility for indigenous peoples to get acquainted with the literate world and, in their own words, “to have their eyes opened” – liberating themselves of the burden of the hacienda (large estates) and the socio-political system then prevalent in the Andean provinces of Peru. Education was one of the fundamental demands in the social uprisings of the rural indigenous peoples, migrant groups and “indigenous” intellectuals.

The second period, starting in the mid 20th century, was characterised by massive schooling and severe pressure from indigenous communities on the State. This second wave took place in the context of the development era and the accompanying processes of industrialisation, which, from the 1940s onwards, gave rise to an impressive migration of the Andean population towards urban areas. At that time the indigenous peoples wanted to make this journey prepared in at least “reading and writing and the four arithmetical operations”. The communities needed school to enable migration to cities and transform the rural Andean world.

The State organised itself to respond to this demand and formal education was made obligatory in the region. The maxim, shared by the State and to a large measure by the indigenous population, was the cultural assimilation of the Andean and Amazonian communities under the banner of modernity. Many schools were created in the communities, then still ‘haciendas’. But the most important developments were taking place in the district and provincial capitals, where even universities were founded with a strong ethnic component – such as the Central Communal University with headquarters in Huancayo.

The third wave began with the 1969 agrarian reform and is characterised by massive educational reforms. Schools were created even in the remotest corners of the country so that by the mid-1980s, there existed very few communities without schools. Many of the schools were bilingual.

At the beginning of the 1980s, Peru held the second best record for schooling in Latin America. The national education vision was founded on the culture of modernity and its’ mission stated very plainly as progress and development. However with the economic crisis of the 1980s, alongside the onset of civil war, the country entered into a spiral of violence which deeply affected Andean communal life.

38. The author can be reached at grimaldo@ddm.com.pe
39. In Peru there are 45 distinct languages and cultures (Chueca 2001: 12) and the educational system considers intercultural relations in the school as one of its main objectives. During the past three decades, intercultural bilingual education has been introduced in Andean and Amazonian rural zones. The education law also promotes curricular diversification. A third of the school curriculum can be devoted to local contents. The vernacular, however, is used as a vehicle for modernisation processes that does not respect local knowledge. Andean Amazonian wisdom is not shown in the context of the Cosmo vision in which it is meaningful and the educational culture of the community, which promotes the regeneration of knowledge within it, is not made visible.
The general and explicit feeling of communities during this period was that education represented the path to progress. The phrase almost unanimously repeated was: “We do not want our children to be like us… illiterate… What I am should end with me”. (Montero, 1990:15).

Even if these words do not necessarily imply the abandonment of tradition, but the widening of the cognitive spectrum, an implicit ‘pact’ was thus established between the State and the community. This pact associated the school to the development and progress of the rural communities. School teachers and communities were not interested in intercultural programmes. The role of the school was clear: the modernisation of the community with the incorporation of science and technology as privileged course contents.

It was common to hear the teachers refer to local knowledge thus:

“Children must change. They must become modern. They should not be poor, backward and ignorant… like their parents. But they continue with the old beliefs of their parents. What’s the use of it? Is it that they want to be like their parents, poor peasants who continue to remember and use their old ways.” (Arohuillca, 2005)

The fourth period marks the contemporary era and can be labelled as the period of globalization. It is framed in the context of the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the end of the Cold War. The impetus for schooling declined and a social, ecological and spiritual crises became evident, both at the global level, as well as in the communities.

In Peru at the beginning of the 21st century, there is an enormous contingent of unemployed teachers (estimated to be more than 50 000 in a country with a population of 24 million). For every 100 Peruvians who enter the system, 74 finish primary school, 69 start secondary level, 49 finish and 38 go on to admission at the Universities. Of these 11 enter university, 6 end and only 4 graduate, while only 0.5 get employment (Orihuela, 2004).

At the end of the 20th century, the Peruvian educational system was declared to be in crisis after a UNESCO evaluation on reading, writing and math competencies in schools.

Five decades into the development era, the Andean communities are noticing that the school system does not respond to the challenges it set out to overcome through its’ creation. Peru is one of the Latin American countries with the highest deficits in educational capacity associated with literacy. The problem of mass drop-out is only part of the problem. The quality of public education is at the core. One generation has sufficed for the myth of progress through schooling to collapse ostentatiously.

Communities have lived this collapse in two settings: in the city which expels them due to lack of employment for the schooled* and in their homes and communities which have eroded culturally, biologically and spiritually. The school, such as it is now, makes little sense to communities, but they do not dismiss it completely.

For parents, schooling has lost its’ purpose today. It has generated intergenerational disconnection and disrespect. School does not open up employment perspectives because of its over-emphasis on a curriculum considered to be of little practical value. The literate show little consideration for ancestral knowledge. Community values have been abandoned and meaningful learning for life is not achieved.

A Quechua community member expressed it thus:

“After entering school my children have changed a lot... They do not listen to me, they do not want to work in the chacra (cultivated field). They complain of too much sun, cold, rain... They despise our old potatoes... They also despise us. They make fun of our customs. My son has changed... they no longer know what we know.” (Arohuillca, ibid.)

40. *The crisis of the early 80s, as Matos Mar says, dispelled the developmentalist illusion and while the state apparatus was surpassed in its capacity of control, planning and ordering due to the scarcity of public funds, and private enterprise limited its absorption of labour, the new urban mass was left abandoned at mid integration face to an insurmountable economic, social and cultural barrier. The high indices of unemployment, the reduction of labour options, the rapid growth of inflation rates, low salaries, put in the course of a few years, the cosmopolitan lifestyles out of reach for the new inhabitant of Lima who had been led to believe that those lifestyles would frame the development of the new Lima. (Matos Mar 1984: 75)
Teachers and community members argue that the State has neglected rural education. The teachers feel that their profession and salaries are devalued. There is a very visible gap between commoners and teachers that reforms are unable to bridge. Lack of respect is generalised.

**Our initiative: The “Children and Biodiversity” Project**

It is in the above context that we initiated a three-year project called “Children and Biodiversity” in January 2002. It was designed to incorporate local knowledge into the school curriculum. The guiding idea was that cultural erosion could be slowed down and significant learning could unfold if the school became more local knowledge-friendly.

This assumption needed three prerequisites to become valid. The first related to change in community perspectives and the preference of community members for school as a vehicle for dialogue between cultures, rather than as one for modernisation. The second prerequisite was the interest of teachers in such a dialogue. Thirdly, the project needed a harmonious and mutually helpful environment in the relationship between school and community.

The first two years were devoted to conversing with teachers and opening their minds to listening to the communities. As expected, not all teachers were interested in such a dialogue. Many were attached to the paradigm of progress and considered the Andean traditions as a cultural burden to be overcome. In spite of these obstacles, a few who were open and interested formed a small nucleus. In some schools, traditional crafts were taught thanks to the participation of many community members and parents. In others, the contents of some subjects were modified to open the curriculum up to a relationship of reciprocal interest and respect between community and school.

However, the opinion of the community families were not known. Between January and June 2004, we asked parents in 14 schools (of the 35 involved in this project) about the type of school they desired: Do you want a school that continues teaching only urban and modern subjects, or do you also wish for the children to learn about their own community’s knowledge?

The general response was: “We wish for the use of both modern knowledge and our own knowledge in school”, “We want children to learn both, iskay yachay (in Quechua)”.

**Why do families now want their children to have both “city and countryside knowledge” as they are referred to?**

The answer of doña Agripina Morel, a Quechua woman from the community of Ccotahuacho, Andahuayas, Apurimac, was immediate: “It is because some of our children leave school and there is no respect for them. Some others leave with university degrees, and there are no jobs for them”.

This statement marks a remarkable change in the current rural Andean perceptions of the role of school and the utopia of modernisation as a whole. The devaluation of tradition had its’ own limits in the performance of the educational system and of the globalising thrust, and opens perspectives to propose new paths to the intercultural dialogue in the school.

For the community, ‘Iskay Yachay’ does not imply the dismissal of the school, but its’ transformation to attend to three demands: the recovery of respect for cultural diversity; the appropriate learning of reading and writing in Spanish and basic maths; and an adequate combination of theory and practice of campesino crafts like pottery, weaving, local medicine, indigenous food, music, dance, agriculture and animal husbandry, etc.

The education system prepared itself for the onset of modernisation, but does not seem ready to address the new demands. The teachers have not received adequate training to stimulate cultural diversity in the classroom and the communities themselves have also had to address the symptoms of the crisis they are experiencing: the erosion of inter-generational respect, the arrival of chemically-driven agriculture, the loss of biodiversity and the spread of religious fundamentalism.

‘Iskay Yachay’ is not only a challenge for education. It also implies the profound transformation of the tenets of the “good life” in the rural areas. Social exclusion, ecological and value crisis are not limited to rural Andean or Amazonian communities. The notional and international scene today raises questions...
about the values associated with progress and modernity. The Andean response to this challenge not only implies getting more out of the present educational service, as well as increasing employment opportunities, but fundamental changes in society’s conception of well-being.

In dealing with these demands, two simultaneous processes were encouraged – one in school, the other in the community. In our understanding, the school will not be friendly to cultural diversity if the community itself does not nurture this diversity. School activities incorporated three aims: the training of teachers as cultural mediators, the incorporation of local knowledge in the curriculum and the teaching of traditional crafts by community members in the school. Community activities were aimed at two aspects: the recovery of inter-generational respect, and the recovery and use of the biodiversity of their cultivators.

At the end of the project’s final year, we asked the participating teachers for their remarks on how the project had affected Quechua and Aymara students in their schools. The response largely shared was that “there exists more trust between children and teachers”, “the students are happier at school”. Absenteeism declined. Children were more comfortable and enthusiastic learning traditional crafts.

What occurred was not a revolution in teaching methodology, but the nurturing of an environment of trust. To understand this, it is necessary to remember that the daily emphasis on rational objectivity by the modernising teacher brought about a mutation of the children’s cultural traditions. Between school and community there stood a strong cultural wall which separated them, forcing children to hide their knowledge and to bear the daily contempt of the teacher in the classroom toward their household customs.

In such a context, what the school produces in the children is cultural iatrogeny – or a set of diseases caused by a cultural shock and expressed in terms of timidity, crying, retraction, muteness, sleepiness, headaches, excessive sweat, low grades and finally drop-out. In situations of biological and psychological stress, communication and openness to learning from other traditions is precluded. This phenomenon is further reinforced if s/he is forced to renounce his/her own culture as a precondition to learning from other traditions. It is not possible to expect an intercultural dialogue in such situation.

To trust means to let oneself be oriented, conducted, nurtured, disposed to listening to unknown knowledge. This implies the existence of a cultural continuity between the spaces of the school and that of the community.

Trust is now reflected in the attitudes of the teachers, as well as the presence of the learner’s parents in the school. Never before has trust become so apparent in the school system. Once the threshold of cultural uncertainty is traversed, diverse modalities to learn the literate culture can be tried. As yet, there are still scarce research efforts on orality and on the educational culture of the communities. These are some initial attempts in this direction.

References:
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5) Orihuela, P, Dec 2004, Informe No. 31. IPP. Instituto de Pedagogía Popular, Lima
The beginning of the awakening of my consciousness happened in diverse, and often complex, socio-political and cultural scenarios. As part of an intensely political and culturally rich society, my life was immensely influenced by dominant political and social trends emerging from the irony of the Afghan war. What dominated then were the politics of State, nationalism, progressive politics and those of Jihad. Though I was aware of those dominant trends, I did not get entangled in the movements. I chose to become part of Pashto Adabi Malgari, an informal group where people from different walks of life, age-groups and ethnicities came to literary sittings or Mushairars.

I consider my engagement with this group as one of the most influential experiences in my life. It transformed my world view and made me realistic, practical and human with regard to my expectations from life. I was reminded that my values were more important than my ambitions. This gave me a sense that life cannot only be made of expectations, acquisitions, possession and control. It is also a process of love, care, forgiveness and support for the people and environment around you. This realisation helped me to escape the false sense of arrogance and elitism which surrounded me like many others from the same backgrounds. It created another kind of sensitivity towards people and communities. I thought I had to do something for the illiterate, tribal and backward. I thought they had to be saved and developed.

It was with this mentality that I joined an NGO, intervening in girls’ education in a World Bank funded project called Balochistan Primary Education Programme. My job was to “mobilize communities” to create primary schools for girls in the rural areas of Balochistan. This was another instrumental experience of my life. I travelled extensively in rural and remote corners of Balochistan. I met with diverse communities, exposed to diverse cultures and life styles. These were culturally rich and religiously conservative.

On the one hand, I found that culture and religion laid foundations for simple, collective, caring and interdependent life. But on the other hand, there were several harmful dimensions. Women were particularly powerless and intensely repressed and victimized by the prevailing norms and customs. Moreover, religion was itself a tool for exploitation by the clergy. The energy of youth was, and continues to be, severely corrupted by the self defined concept of Jihad. But my work continued and I was convinced that education will eradicate all these dichotomies and vulnerabilities. So I actually reinforced my work with a renewed religious commitment.

My self transformation began with the emergence of the Institute for Development Studies and Practices (IDSP). In 1998, many of us (people working in the same field as I) started thinking that there must be a learning space where people could come and share their experiences and understand them within the framework of wider conceptual and theoretical contexts. Initially the intellectual purpose for such work was not very clear. Apparently, the intention was to professionalize youth involved in development projects and ensure capacity building in this area by improving their skills in various organizational, management and technical areas.

41. The author can be reached at raziq2000@yahoo.com
In 1999, IDSP made the shift from a technical centre for development studies, to a learning space where ten young people from tribal and rural backgrounds went through a process of intense reflection, reading and understanding to explore the internal logic of education and development paradigms.

We formulated three fundamental questions for engagement with young people:

- What is the colonial and imperialist basis of dominant development practices?
- How do schools and media institutionalize and justify control over the social majorities of the world and how do they maintain the status quo?
- How can culture and spirituality be the channel for regeneration, re-creation, and reconstruction?

At that time, the environment was not conducive to such initiatives. Nor was there any support available. But for us it continued to be a relevant process of exploration, critical understanding, demystification and self-realization. This journey of self-criticism/actualization exposed me to the complexities of issues. During this search, I realised that spirituality is at the core of one's life, and is a primary reference, not just one aspect of it. It is through one's spiritual understandings that one verifies and invigorates one's actions, relationships and intentions. The dilemma lies in the potential for spirituality to be victimizing and liberating at the same time.

While the dominant attitude within mainstream development processes totally rejects the importance of religion and tradition as a source for rebuilding, the fundamentalist clergy exploited people's spiritual and creative sensitivities for their own political interests during the Cold War. A tremendous amount of money was invested to promote the concept of Jihad, thereby strengthening the clergy and justifying/continuing a war between people in the name of Islam.

This led to ‘searching’ for ways to regenerate spirituality and culture as a way to counter the pathologies resulting from a rigid understanding of religion and victimizing various groups in society. We had to find ways to unleash positive energy among people to re-think meanings and worldviews emerging from their own life experiences. We also striving to understand the Quraan through its own lens.

It was tremendously empowering to re-investigate the ethical foundations of the Quraan and then redefine rights, principles, spiritual and moral duties in order to deal with oppression, tyranny and control. We did not set out to convert people or make the Muslims more religious. Our intention was to make people aware and critical of the conditioning they were living with, to make them self-accountable and to reinforce their own capacities to challenge the systems of control. The second objective was to redirect energies from the illusions of development to the socio-economic, cultural and spiritual realities and roots of communities.

We have spent five years in this struggle. Sometimes we became conventional, sometimes very radical, sometimes we were all over the place and at other times we seemed to be nowhere at all. On a journey where we have tried to find our own paths and have created others, we have made mistakes but we have also found good directions. Presently we are consolidating our thoughts, beliefs and realizations and are trying to redefine our space, beliefs and thrusts. These experiences have given us the tremendous strength to be more focussed, firm and clear.

- We believe that regeneration of culture and religion are part and parcel of human development. They generate resistance to all forms of control, nurture spirituality and revive the essence of human interaction based on collectiveness, creativity and freedom.
- We believe that dominant notions of development ignore, deviate and do not acknowledge the richness of people's knowledge, wisdom and creativity. It is therefore imperative to regain and reclaim indigenous values, practices, processes and repressed knowledge based on people's own wisdom and sensibilities.
- We deny the colonial logic of dominant development practices, modernity and education and are committed to redefining contexts and perspectives vis-à-vis people's own social, political and cultural realities using a blend of theory and practice as tools.
- We believe that self-actualization and global understanding are two sides of the same coin. Understanding the self and globe will help to counter injustice, tyranny, oppression, exploitation, and racism.

42. Including myself, we were all initially learners at IDSP, then faculty and mentors for the Institute.
IDSP is an open learning space, independent of conventional dominant definitions of institutions and structures. People within IDSP thus define this space naturally and organically and decide about actions and practices that are in line with their discussions. This learning space today proposes:

- **Special courses** for groups of young people around religion and spirituality, where participants analyse the political, social and economic causes of the corruption of religious practices and spiritual traditions in our societies; discuss the contribution of imperialist powers during the Cold War to the growth of extremist religious forces in the region; study the impact of mainstream media in promoting religious extremism and violence; explore the intellectual foundation to promote and nurture the demonization of Islam; and explore the impact of all these factors in victimizing minorities, women and children and sustaining political corruption.

- **A discourse** in the framework of interaction and discussions with communities around their own learning paths: seeking and exploring possible avenues; creating viable processes to regenerate the essence of spiritual traditions and paths for rebuilding and reconstruction; getting communities, and particularly youth, to re-assert their right of interpretation and re-definition of the moral and spiritual wisdom in Islam, understanding the issues of rights in the ethical framework of Islam, stimulating inter-faith discourse among different religious groups around core political, social, and religious issues. We initiate this discourse within multi-religious and mono-religious communities. The faculty also dialogues with religious leaders, scholars, and founders and managers of religious institutions in the country.

- **Intensive research and reflection on how to connect with the larger Islamic community on this learning path**: We would like to strengthen our exploration and understanding of spiritual traditions especially in the Islamic countries but also in other non-islamic parts of the world.

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43. The term ‘course’ is a metaphor for the flow of a river or it’s course. It understands that the process of human resource development cannot be structured in rigid disciplines through competition, reward/punishment, syllabus and monotonous teaching. Learning which is spontaneous, natural, and creative is allowed to just flow freely like in a river.

44. We believe that, consciousness develops and progresses through human interactions which are characterized by spontaneity, freedom of expression and contribution. By ‘discourse’, we mean generative and self organized exchanges of thoughts around specific themes or issues. The spaces we generally explore for the mentioned discourse is the workplace, home, religious spheres and playgrounds in the community.
self-sustaining, self-sufficient tribal commune initiated by K. J. Baby and his wife Shirley in a small village in Wayanad Kerala, India, Kanavu is a pioneering revolutionary experiment in education and living. It has its origins in a tribal myth called Mavelimantram (an ideal habitat), which is also the name of a novel written by K.J. Baby, that won him the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award.

K.J. Baby’s family hails from Kanjirapally and migrated to Peravur, in Kannur district, adjacent to Wayanad, in the 1920s. In the early 1970s, following the death of his father, the family moved to Wayanad. On completion of secondary schooling, Baby went to Bombay for a technical course, abandoned it midway and returned to work among the tribals, keeping his interest in literature and arts alive. “Seeing the misery of the tribals, I could not but work for them”, he explains.

He studied their songs, dialects and myths and wrote plays based on their stories. Apoorna, depicting the plight of the tribals was the first major success. This was followed a few years later by Nadugaddika, a milestone in Malayalam theatre. A tribal myth and history, the play’s oracle-like protagonist was modeled on the assassinated Naxalite leader, Verghese of Wayanad.

The staging of the play all over Kerala during the late seventies and early eighties coincided with the Naxalites’ resurgence after the police repression in the sixties. Baby, never really a Naxalite, clarifies “My work was mainly with children. I could never accept a theory of annihilation, although I shared with the Naxalites a deep craving for social change”. However, the left front government banned the play. Baby and his troupe were branded Naxalites, arrested and jailed for three months.

In 1984, Baby married Shirley, a college lecturer. The bitter experiences of activism saw Baby lying low for a while, but he came back to an active life in the 1990s with Mavelimantram, a novel, and Kanavu, its replica in real life. Critics regard the novel, a delightful mix of tribal tales, myths and folk songs, as the first major Indian literary venture dealing with tribal anthropology and eco-romanticism.

Mavelimantram (1991) portrays dispersed moments and fragments of history of the Adiyor tribe of Wayanad, wherein they speak and talk back to the powers that marginalized them. By searching for the hidden past, fragmentary testimonials and lost moments, the novel seeks to restore the integrity of indigenous histories that appear naturally in non-linear, oral, symbolic, vernacular forms.

Kanavu is a commune of about 50 people – children, teachers, elders and young families on the banks of Narasipuzha, a tributary of Kabani, at Cheengode village in Wayanad. It represents a model of a casteless society believed to have existed during Mavelikkalam, a golden period in tribal history.

It took seed in the thatched annex of Baby and Shirley’s home where tribals and others gathered regularly to rehearse plays. The children preferred watching these rehearsals to attending school and soon began to troop in even on days when there were no rehearsals. All were different ages and had varied academic interests, but commonly rejected regular schooling.

45. For more about this initiative, please contact: shirlykallumkall@rediffmail.com
46. A State literary award
47. An extreme leftist revolutionary movement created in 1967 in Naxalbari, West Bengal in India.
The conviction that modern education would not pre-empt the emancipation of tribals drove Baby and his wife to launch Kanavu. Years of social work among the tribals convinced them of the natives’ instinctive aversion towards Malayalam\(^{48}\), the language of their oppressors.

Baby relates “The tribals speak in different dialects that are a blend of Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam. The written language has little relevance to their life and surroundings. As a result, very few tribals went to school and even those who did go, were utter failures because schools teach in Malayalam. I made this discovery while trying to teach them Malayalam. I realized the futility of imposing modern education on them”.

Kanavu, became a space to help native people regenerate pride in their heritage and discover literacy. While the majority of children belong to the Paniya tribe, some are Naickars. The main tools for learning are their own instincts and senses.

The usual day at this ‘school’ begins with yoga, kalari\(^{49}\), meditation, followed by a bath in the river and breakfast. Depending on their interests, children then settle down to lessons in Science, History, English and Malayalam or practice needle work, cooking or farming. Some days, there is work on the farm. At nightfall, it is reading time, but the children are free to skip this if they wish. The objective here has been to enable children with skills needed to lead a meaningful life, and re-instil a sense of pride in native dialects, history and art forms.

Learning at Kanavu, starts with understanding the immediate environment. Directly involved in vegetable and rice farming, children learn to grow their own food and discover the inter-connectedness between the soil and their lives. Children learn to tap rubber on their own rubber estate. They regularly walk into the forests with their teacher; “This direct contact with nature brings them to love and respect it, more than any book can.”

Children’s education as imagined by Baby and Shirley at Kanavu aims first and foremost at reinforcing their knowledge about their own tribal community, their history, art forms, culture, and environs in their own language and in their own space. These children were often confused, vulnerable to an identity crisis which sometimes would result in switching from tribal names to more popular non-tribal ones. Although their culture associates Malayalam with the language of the oppressor and has always been a metaphor for dictatorship and humiliation, they speak their own dialect with reservation. At Kanavu, they have come a long way but the awe for the Malayalee\(^{50}\) is still prevalent. Participation in festivals and visits to places associated with tribal culture is part of this process to regenerate self-respect among tribal students. The learners are encouraged to talk to various tribal leaders in order to get an undistorted version of Wayanad’s history.

Children at Kanavu grow with music. While some are good singers, others play traditional tribal instruments. Many of the songs are written by Baby and sung in traditional tribal tunes. The Kanavu music troupe is famous in Kerala and generates income to meet the expenses of the study tours and school maintenance. The troupe has several recorded albums to its credit. In 2004, children, trained in theatre, made Guda, a film based on tribal customs.

Shirley explains, “Our idea is to allow students to make enough progress and find out for themselves what suits them best”. Regular evaluations determine the children’s awareness levels. While no great emphasis is laid on Malayalam, Hindi or English, children do make considerable progress in these languages as well. A handwritten magazine, ‘Kanavu’ published by children bears witness to the skills acquired in these languages. Story narration, interesting reading and songs help in keeping the children’s interest in alien languages alive.

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48. The official language of Kerala, a State in South India.
49. A local martial art.
50. Non-tribal Keralite
Children undertake academic learning at their own pace. Since it is a mixed age group, they mostly learn from one another. When the seniors in the group wish to pursue a particular skill, they are either guided by mentors from the community, or by a tutor invited to become a temporary resident of the community. They can also be guided towards professional training courses. Pottery, soft wood sculpting, metal embossing, ayurvedic medicine, farming, music, dance, painting, Kalari filmmaking are some of the learning opportunities available.

To conclude Baby clarifies “We would like our children to be productive members of their community and society. Our worlds are based on our knowledge, reading and experience. So when children start to develop their own views, our role is to introduce them to inspiring people. Our children are free to design their activities for the day. Some have matured to planning their day, implementing their plans and evaluating the day in the evening. This self-direction and routine is quite important as it inspires them to enquire from within and pursue with self motivation”.
After a long learning journey through the formal education system, first as students and later as teachers, Gopalakrishnan and Vijayalekshmi harboured a dream to create a university proposing no degrees or certificates, but offering a space to learn to cope with life and all its’ myriad hues and tones. Both originating from farmer families, they never sent their own children into mainstream schooling and bear testimony to ‘how children learn on their own’.

A peep into this journey would help explain the essence of this dream. In 1981, Vijayalekshmi was appointed a teacher in the Agali Lower Primary School in Palakkad district and Gopalakrishnan was teaching in the Calicut district. In 1982, faced with several cases of ‘problem children’, the couple decided to found the Sarang Basic School for the academically backward in Palakkad district.

In 1983 Gopalakrishnan shifted to the Kottamala Government Lower Primary School in Attappady block in Palakkad. Soon after, Vijayalekshmi was also appointed teacher in the same school. The couple made a perfect team, determined to make the Kottamala School into a centre for learning rather than one for noon meals!

As a rule no child can be retained in the same class up to grade four in Government schools. Most students did not know more than the basic alphabet but the non-literate parents were under the impression that their children were excelling. Unhappy with this practice, Vijayalekshmi decided to detain all children of her class the year she joined duty at Kottamala, a decision that spurred the anger of parents. However after dialogue, their attitude changed and they even began to get more involved in the academic progress of their children. Consequently, lethargic teachers were forced to attend more seriously to their duties.

As the news of this teacher couple’s deep involvement in school education spread, the school numbers rose from 46 to 360. The building was no longer adequate nor were the number of teachers. The couple decided to introduce a shift system and later mobilised parents to demand for more teachers.

However their contact with environmentalists exposed them to the importance of forests for the ecological balance of the planet. They decided to create awareness on the issue, prepared crude slide-shows and travelled around by bicycle on a campaign that rendered the timbre lobby and politicians uneasy.

Similar experiences in other areas contributed to the conviction that mainstream education was quite futile when it came to environmental, social, political or any of common man’s issues for that matter. In the classroom, they tried to initiate discussions on matters that one comes across in daily life. They took students on study tours to the police station, telephone exchange and other public offices. Gradually students began reading newspapers.

By 1983, they came to the conclusion that a child can learn what he wants to learn at his own pace and that the role of the adult is purely to support him. Government schools in this respect had their limitations, added to which is the pressure from local politicians.

That very year, they decided to buy land on a hilltop at Attapady. The land was dry, exposed to wind and had a waterless stream. They dreamt of regenerating the stream and soil and using wind energy to make electricity. They wanted to create a learning centre – a rural university! However this meant ceasing their work with the Sarang Basic School.
In 1989, Gopalakrishnan resigned from Government service to devote time to working on the hilltop. Vijayalekshmi continued to teach part-time but also resigned in 1990. A few other children joined them and their son on the land. Some stayed for long years, while others came for short periods. Children were allowed to play and participate in all activities that were a part of the hilltop routine. As parents, they taught children to wash their own clothes and dishes, keep home and premises clean, attend to farm and household chores and share with each other. Apart from this, children learned to read, write, sing and dance. They acquired other skills like extinguishing forest fires, building traditional houses and thatching roofs etc.

Since both had quit their jobs, the financial situation was hard. The much-needed finances were raised by selling indigenous seeds and handmade greeting cards to visitors, as well as undertaking screen-printing jobs. Their enthusiasm sometimes led them to take a few loans out. And as these kept accruing, the financial burdens began to grow. There were six adults and five children living at Sarang now! Pretty much a family affair.

One fine morning they decided to take the plunge and officially open the Sarang Alternative school to public. The 5th of June 1995 saw 35 students enrol. The first month was spent in free learning, sculpting soft wood and any other activity of their interest. Gradually they started structured classes. Children came from all communities, Malayalam, and Irula (a native dialect) being the languages of communication. Texts in Irula were prepared using the Malayalam script. Native children progressed very fast with the aid of these texts. Specially designed simplified text books were prepared for some children.

The children were divided according to skills and abilities. Areas of study included watershed management, fire prevention, traditional farming using zero erosion methods, astronomy, politics, teenage and sexuality, construction and masonry, cooking, handicrafts, blacksmith skills, music, dance, leadership skills, outdoor camping, English, drought and desertification. The following year 15 more joined. The senior batch by now already had a few skills to ‘teach’ the ‘fresh students’.

Sarang as a concept was successful. However its’ inability to face a financial crisis forced it to close down. Their son Gautham, carries the Sarang flame in his heart, however, and has future plans for Sarang.

Gautham is a living testimony to this unique experiment in education, not only as a student, but also as a teacher for a while. He is a young man of 24 today, and all set to revive this real-life university, fully convinced that it is now his turn to offer to others the unique learning experience he received at Sarang…

Gautam relates his journey through Sarang:

I embarked on the Sarang journey in 1983 along with a few other children. Sarang was initially called an experimental centre for alternative education. My parents dreamt of a rural “university” and created an ideal campus for the purpose.

Our curriculum was ‘life as it is’. The acquired land was a barren hilltop, with no water supply. People struggled for simple amenities and so improving this situation became the curriculum. Sarang embarked on an ambitious plan to rejuvenate the watershed by re-foresting the area. My earliest memories are of fetching water from the bottom of the hill and coming all the way back up. Naturally, very early in life, I learnt my lessons in minimum resource use. Treating resources with respect and using just as much as required, and not as much as available, became a habit.

We once tried to plant trees and failed on account of severe drought. We nurtured the land however and learned natural farming, gully plugging and fire protection measures. We learned to build a simple mud house with locally available material and to ward off wild animals etc. At the same time, topics such as politics, health, environment and sex education, to name a few, were introduced into the ‘curriculum’. In fact, all our daily experiences were integrated into the learning process.

51. A tradition in Attappady of starting forest fires around ‘Shiva-rathri’, an important Hindu festival, was drastically affecting the ecology of the area. They started an awareness campaign against this practice, putting out fires and training their children and others to do so.

52. If you wish to know more about this initiative, please write to gauthamgsarang@yahoo.com
We learned our geometry in the process of building the school-house and geography and natural sciences through the forestation and watershed development activities. In about eight years our forest grew, the watershed was restored and aquifers were rejuvenated. Amazingly water became abundant on the hill throughout the year.

I was living and sharing my life with 10 other children, some of who stayed with us, while others came daily from outside. We often learnt the same thing at the same time but at various levels of understanding. At Sarang there was no ‘bringing up’ children, there were children ‘growing up’. People visiting us every year often remarked on how well children and forests were both growing!

We were all treated as intelligent learners and never written off as mere kids. All our individual interests were taken seriously and supported for in-depth study. I once expressed an interest in radio and was introduced to the world of electronics. I even spent some time in a local radio repair shop assisting the shopkeeper who, unfortunately, was hesitant to let me progress beyond dusting the radios!

In 1988, as a seven year old, I joined Mohan Kumar, coordinator for the Kerala contingent of the ‘Save the Western Ghats March’ in a month long trek from Kanyakumari to Goa along with hundreds of activists in their campaign. I prepared for the march by practicing to walk twenty kilometres a day. I carried only two pairs of clothes, washed and changed daily, wrote a post card home regularly. Each day of the march was a new learning experience. But at times it became so tiring that Mohan Kumar and others had to carry me on their shoulders!

When I was 10, I wanted to learn Kalari (a martial art form of Keralam). To do so, I had to go to the nearby town of Idukki. My mother taught me to cook, wash clothes and take care of myself and my basic needs. When my parents thought that I could fend for myself, they rented a room for Mamas, my younger cousin, and me, and arranged for our Kalari tuition. We spent six weeks learning the art. In addition, we also joined typewriting and drawing classes.

This was an early lesson in self-reliance, self-restraint and self-confidence. I enjoyed it so much that I repeated it once more, this time at the Veda academy in Guruvayoor. Our teacher in Idukki had to shift for personal reasons. At Guruvayoor, I continued with Kalari, Bharat Natyam, Yoga, English Grammar and Typewriting.

At Sarang sometimes, if we wanted to learn a particular art form, skill or subject in which my parents were not competent, we would have teachers come and live with us for a short duration. This added to the variety of our learning experiences.
When someone fell ill, the occasion was grabbed to study health and medicine. We learned how to treat common ailments with home remedies, aleopathy or naturopathy.

These methods of learning made us confident, healthy, strong and fearless. When I was 15, I remember I had a fall and had to have my knee stitched up. This was done in a hospital, but I took no medication or anaesthesia. The wound healed in nine days, I just walked back to the hospital and had the stitches removed.

My interests in electronics stayed with me. I was fascinated with electronic equipment and this somehow led me to parallel communication systems. I prepared for the amateur radio communication examination, a prerequisite for obtaining the coveted license. Learning itself took about a year, but the procedure to secure the license involved a long wait of three years, which included a trip to Delhi. I further learnt how bureaucracy operates. I am proud to say that I am now a member of the global Ham family.

Looking back I feel that I have been blessed with very special parents and that my early education was very comprehensive. I have two sisters, Kannaki and Unniyarchcha who are aged ten and eight respectively. Both study at Sarang - my home - the rural university!

When we ran into financial troubles in 1997-1998, Sarang had to be officially closed. In order to help ease the financial burdens, I started to collect milk from the village to sell in nearby villages. For a time I also operated a taxi service. I now freelance as a reporter and photographer using my computer and documentation skills and I am also the field representative for the Organic Farming Association of India. But my dream is to revive Sarang. Sarang has taught me so much that I owe this in return. I would love to share with other children what I received for life from SARANG!"

The freedom to learn at Sarang – In dialogue with Gopalakrishnan and Vijayalekshmi

How did Gautham learn to read and write?

When he was six months old, we saw him observing us reading and writing. Being teachers, we had to do a lot of it and he used to snatch our books away from us. We made books out of newspaper for him. At first he tore them all. Later he learned to handle them. Then we gave him books made of cheap blank paper and a pencil. And we gave a ‘teacher’s tick mark’ with a date every time on whatever he scribbled. He liked that!

He started preserving those books. He soon realized that writing is something done in a line and started to scribble in lines. Instead of alphabets he made circles, curls and images that looked like letters. He used to write stories in this way and ‘read’ it to us. His observation led him to conclude that written material usually has a heading in bigger and prominent font. He often ‘read’ from his imagination. We used to read letters aloud to each other. Once we wrote a letter to Prof. John. C. Jacob. (One of the pioneers in Kerala’s environmental movements. Popularly know as ‘Johny mammen’). He was very fond of Gautham. When Gautham wanted to write a letter to ‘Johnsy mammen’, he made some circles and dots and read it to us in detail. We sent the letter to John.C with a ‘translation’ note. John.C replied to Gautham. This encouraged him to write to many others.

Long after he realized that what he was putting down on paper was not really writing. So great was his embarrassment that he stopped writing for some time. Gradually he began to comprehend the shapes of letters from the titles of magazines and newspapers. In our observation children look at words and titles as whole units and slowly by comparison, comprehend differences between alphabets. In Gautham’s case, I think, this is what happened. Because, one day while we were still under the impression that he was pretending to read he surprised us by reading correctly from a children's magazine at hand. So we are proud to say that he learnt to read all by himself.

So you cannot exactly determine when he picked up reading skills?

No we don’t know, but he could read fluently before the age of five. Even Unniyarchcha, our third child, started on similar lines and could read fluently by the age of six. At the time, we were referring to some books on medicinal plants. It had small print, not at all ideal for children. She was watching me day after day, and making me read, and soon started to read by herself. Usually children are comfortable with big alphabets. This was not the case with her. She then learnt botanical names of plants from the
book. By reading and questioning, she learnt to identify the plant families in our surrounding. Now she is able to identify almost 20 plant families. Generally this skill is learnt at senior school and graduation level. This is why we say that one cannot design a syllabus. Each child is different and has varied capacities and will grasp what is of interest to them at the right time.

Our second daughter, Kannaki, is different. She is now ten years but is not at all interested in reading and writing.

**Do you see a pressure, subconsciously because of her younger sister’s skills?**

We don’t see any. Unniyarchcha reads to Kannaki. Previously Kannaki was not even interested to listen to stories. That is now changing. Her skills lie in another area altogether. She could identify plants by their shape and smell even before she was two years old and would point out particular medicinal plants to me even before she could pronounce their names. She now regularly accompanies visitors to Sarang in a guided tour and gives her version of the surroundings after we have done so.
Puttani Makkala Shale – School for little children - is the realisation of a dream, dreamt by Rajani Garud. Hailing from Sirsi in Karnataka, Rajani is a theatre artist married to Prakash, a fourth generation traditional puppeteer.

In 1996 Rajani moved to Dharwad, the academic town of the State, with the intention of experimenting with children’s education through theatre. Dr. Sanjeev Kulkarni, a gynaecologist and social activist in Dharwad and his wife Pratibha, coincidentally looking for a creative way to educate their son Minchu, supported her project to launch the Puttani Makkala Shale. Ten years later, the school has grown to be a significant space for cultural activities and radical innovations in education.

Rajani now tours extensively to popularize theatre for education. Along with her husband Prakash and their five year old daughter Bhoomika, she wishes to initiate a theatre-based learning centre. Rajani holds a diploma from the Institute of Theatre, in Sirsi, Karnataka and had her first brush with teaching in Shimoga, Karnataka where she worked with a UNICEF project for anganwadi children.

“I found that education was separated from life. It was academic spoon-feeding, lacking any consideration for social responsibility or political awareness and even less for cultural dimensions. I thought theatre could be a good medium for education. After all, children love the world of stories, drama and make-believe. Children grasp things immediately when events are dramatized.”

The first supporter of her idea Dr. Kulkarni explains: “Very deeply inspired by Tottochan, Diwaswapna, Letter to a teacher and other books and authors like John Holt, sending our four year old son to a school was out of the question. We were looking for alternatives when we came across Rajani. She proposed to start a school using theatre as the main medium. She had already hired a small room and was busy experimenting with a couple of kids. We happened to meet, and in the course of our chat, I suggested that we could start the school with our son and the other two kids who were already in her care. So, in 1996, the school started in our drawing room with three children. By the end of the year, ten others had enrolled. Gradually we had to purchase adjoining premises to run the school”.

“Initially, Rajani and Pratibha, my wife took all major decisions, the most important of them being to ensure that there were no barriers between the learner and the teacher. They decided that there would be no uniforms, no shoes. Communication and learning would be in the mother tongue and, as far as possible, would take place outdoors rather than being confined indoors. So they came up with a blend of outdoor free learning complimented with a lot of theatre. Theatre included puppetry, drama, music, song, languages, costume making, time management and so on.

53. For more about this initiative, please write to Taleemnet at taleem@multiworld.org
54. A State in southern India.
55. Government day-care centres for pre-primary children.
They relied immensely on the above, but also on clay work, nature study etc. as mediums to introduce concepts and content. Reading and writing would enter the curriculum at a later stage. Instead there was playing, hugging, singing, story telling. The conventional evaluation procedures were replaced by descriptive feedback on the children. Home assignments, if any, were a joint parent-child activity. A lot of stress was laid on including children from all backgrounds.

In the beginning, the school and its’ methods were very well received. However, once children reached the age of six or seven (around Grades 1 and 2 in conventional schooling terms), parents started getting anxious. Hence it was decided to adopt a few books prescribed by the State Board and published by popular publishers and NCERT as a broad guideline for grammar or math exercises.

Today the school has over a hundred pupils. It has a low teacher-student ratio of around 1:12. The medium of instruction is Kannada (the mother tongue) with English and Hindi, Sanskrit introduced at the Grade III level. The school presently offers instruction up to grade seven level. During the summer vacation, a lot of kids from nearby towns who are coming to visit their relatives in Dharwad participate in the school’s theatre workshops.

The curriculum is planned on a weekly basis and parents are informed in advance in order to ensure their involvement all the way through. The curriculum is revised every summer. This helps us learn from our experiences and adapt suitably each year.

Teachers here love their vocation. Their belief in the methods practiced in this school is strong. Their own children school here. While some are volunteers, others draw a small allowance, sufficient only to meet travel and overheads. Very few draw a full salary.

The school now has over a hundred students from pre-school to Grade VII and a staff of ten. There is no advance blueprint for the school. We allow it to evolve and grow with the children. An option worth considering when the time for certification does crop up is the National Open School.”

Rajani Garud explains:

For the first three years, I focussed on gaining the consent of parents with regards to our ideas, ideals and methodology. To this end, we regularly invited guests and experts to address them. Using theatre, drawing, painting, song and puppetry, we focussed on skills related to physical, mental and emotional growth as well as to language acquisition. The parents were very cooperative.

How to take the school further, and what learning to initiate, were issues that we jointly discussed with parents. We introduced themes and activities with their consent and approval and yet they seemed a little apprehensive when comparing their kids to the others in the community. The ‘other’ children had learned to read and write, while our pupils were still working with theatre and other skills.

When our first batch of pupils reached Grade I, we encountered for the first time the question of choice of Board and syllabus. One glaring problem with all the available options was that none of them offered any learning that applied to the child’s immediate environment. For instance simple and relevant topics like my town, my village, my school, my home etc, were conspicuously absent in the textbooks. The Grade III syllabus included Europe and Japan! This was beyond my comprehension.

I attempted a dialogue with the local Education Officers on the lack of relevance of this syllabus. Feeling helpless, and much to the discomfort of parents, we created our own syllabus. The parents however wanted the school to be recognised by the education authorities.

Language teaching involves theatre and story telling. Books are limited to a bare minimum. Maths and science teaching is activity-based and complimented with a few books. English was introduced to children of class I very cursorily. The school earned the reputation of being a “different kind of school”. However, even the local Block Education Officer was happy with our work.

As the children got bigger, we needed higher grade levels and we ran into problems! The main problem we had was with the teachers because their formal training in education made it difficult for them to adapt to the ideas and methodologies of this particular school. Trained teachers were not suitable. It took us a year to train them in ‘our methods’ and it wasn’t easy. Introducing Maths and Science through creative activity was a great challenge.
How does one use theatre in Maths and Science? History could be taught through drama and theatre. Some of the maths notions could be introduced through known popular ways like puzzles, games and riddles. This too ran into problems as teachers were conditioned to working within systems. To counter this, I started changing the syllabus every year.

Each year, the incoming batch of children are different, their abilities and shortcomings diverse. So we wanted to adapt accordingly. This approach obviously entails work and discourages the teachers. I do not like the word methodology because it denies creativity. Every group has different abilities and they have to be helped through different methods. This is something the teachers did not accept readily.

Alternative education is not about an alternative methodology. Alternative education is not a methodology, but an alternative way of learning. I had several differences with parents and teachers on this.

On the other hand children approached learning very creatively, progressed and performed well, found creative answers to problems and showed a high degree of self-confidence. Their writing skills improved immensely over the years, as did their reading and oral skills. All this gave them a high level of confidence. This undoubtedly can be credited to theatre. It proved to be a rather slow, but sure process with no immediate results.

If you ask me how they will fare in a common qualifying exam, I may not be able to predict. In what way this experience will influence their future is something that only time will tell. What will their societal role be? I do not know. We have to watch them to know the real impact of this education on their lives. The life they lead as adults, the vocations they choose will be the answers to those questions.

The general assumption is that theatre is a medium of entertainment. It is our responsibility to change that. Since theatre can grip a person’s attention and influence his thinking and action, I think theatre and theatre artists carry a social responsibility. In fact all cultural pursuits carry with them a social responsibility. Dramas, music, painting, all have social responsibilities. We had to convince parents of this. Theatre, mask making, story telling, working with clay, science experiments, puppetry, are activities that can be drawn on to pass on traditions.

How do you teach subjects like Physics, Chemistry, Algebra and Geometry through theatre?

Up to Grade V, one can use theatre to teach most subjects. Thereafter, complex scientific notions appear. The general impression is that Maths and Science are very difficult subjects. Children therefore often approach them with great reluctance and fear. We have succeeded in making those subjects fun. Running the home and the kitchen are great feats of Mathematics and Science. You can learn this without text books. Pre-history was taught through theatre. Project work involves children immensely and makes learning interesting.

After Grade VI, the use of textbooks becomes necessary as topics are dealt with in greater detail. When children reach this grade, they are usually well equipped to complete the year’s prescribed syllabus in three months. Government textbooks are translated into Kannada and used for complementary learning through the rest of the year!

It is a known fact that rural children have a better understanding of life-related phenomenon like for instance, where does milk come from? How is fire produced? Where does grain and food come from? City children are often ignorant of these basic facts. The question therefore for us was what did we want the children to know and understand. How did we want them to grow? Along with the parents and children, we initiated an enquiry into where Science, Social Science, language or Maths started. Parents played an active role in getting their children to discover these phenomenon in daily life. Based on this, we designed our own text for junior school.

What has been the attitude of parents in this entire exercise?

We insist on the very important role the parents play at this primary level. We expect them to learn along with children and monitor their learning related activities closely. Urban schooled parents have high expectations from the school and their children. Moreover the urban child is often advanced in
bookish knowledge as they are exposed to books at a very early age. Rural parents are much more mature and balanced towards their children’s education. However some come with unrealistic expectations and aspirations.

**What will the children take away from their experiences at this school?**

Children have turned out to be academically strong without having to resort to rote learning. They are good judges of what is good and bad, are particular about cleanliness and sensitive to other children’s privacy and freedom.

**Prakash Garud writes:**

Prakash Garud is a fourth-generation traditional theatre artist. Initially a Science graduate, he decided to abandon that path and pursue the family tradition of theatre. Prakash was attracted towards children’s theatre and gradually got engaged into child education through theatre.

“The main role of theatre is to convey messages and entertain people. You have to develop the skill to role play and communicate with effect. Moreover you have to work in harmony with others in order to produce a good performance. In my opinion this is a great asset for life. Theatre, puppetry, story telling and other fine arts force you to be with yourself. Art forms have uncanny ways to get you in touch with your own soul and the soul of your audience.

Over the years, the teaching of these forms of expression have acquired a purely commercial or competitive dimension. A non-commercial artist is considered a failure. Every art is a dialogue with one self and one’s audience. It is building of a human relationship.

Education really should have the components of information, experience, self evaluation and knowledge. Mainstream education is restricted to the level of information. The experiential factor is conspicuously missing. Theatre provides an opportunity to blend into and imbibe these components. Convincing parents and the public about these methodologies will depend entirely on how we fair and what results the parents see in their children. Our endeavour is to help children identify their strengths and pursue vocations that bring them joy and satisfaction instead of blindly pursuing the mad rush to make life easy and convenient.”

The three preceding stories documented by Taleemnet59, are part of a series on Pioneering Vernacular Educators in India, available on the Non-formal education webpage on the UNESCO Literacy portal [http://www.unesco.org/education/literacy](http://www.unesco.org/education/literacy).

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59. Taleemnet is part of the Multiworld network which generates and supports better, diverse, and more effective learning opportunities that respect individual freedom and dignity. Please refer to [http://www.multiworld.org/](http://www.multiworld.org/)
Organic learning among organic farmers

Claude Alvarese, India

In India, a new source of learning has come from an entirely unexpected quarter: sustainable or organic agriculture. The Green Revolution and its’ capital intensive technology were introduced in India in 1966. Experts simply assumed that it was a superior technology and that farmers would have to be trained all over again to be able to exploit it successfully.

At the time, the Green Revolution in Asia heralded a major exercise in ‘de-learning’ within the farming community. Farmers were encouraged to ‘forget’ the knowledge on which traditional practices were based and ‘relearn’ the new packages. As a result, a tradition of farming that stretched over 40 centuries was forced to be abandoned.

After a mere 30 years, different problems associated with the Green Revolution have come to hit agriculture in those areas where it had confidently held sway. As crops have failed due to the inherent limitations of the new technologies, farmers have switched over to organic farming which eschews the Green Revolution package of practices.

But how have farmers been able to do this? None of our universities really have any expertise on how to farm without chemicals and pesticides.

The answer is to be found in self-directed learning. Farmers have had to first, learn themselves, then second, train their colleagues and fellow villagers in the new practices of organic agriculture.

Almost all organic farmers are self-taught or are now using techniques that have been circulated among themselves by other successful organic farmers. Several farmers, in fact, have set up experimental centres for advancing the potential of organic farming. Others have written considerable literature in local languages and undertaken training programme for their fellow villagers.

The Organic Farming Association of India is presently seeking to carefully document this major paradigm shift in learning in the rural areas and to acknowledge its’ significance for all those interested in learning outcomes outside of stranglehold of modern knowledge institutions. It involves careful and in-depth assessing of learning experiences of individual organic farmers through their own language and experience. It also involves identifying spaces that will stimulate and enhance further learning opportunities for village communities, bringing to the public arena the new agricultural techniques invented by them. Lastly, it involves the creation of learning opportunities for the children of organic farmers (and of the more conventional class of farmers).

At present, children of the farming community are encouraged to go to school. The school is designed for manufacturing factory-made products that have absolutely no interest or expertise in agriculture which has now become an area they’d rather abandon. We seek to explore ways and means through which children of farmers can learn what they desire, including reading and writing, but not at the expense of deleting their option to work with their parents on the land.

60. The author can be reached at gaafoundation@gmail.com
UNDERSTANDING THE CALL FOR DIVERSITY
I feel embarrassed to choose a tautology as my title. ‘Learning for all’… Why exclude anyone? And ‘learning from all’… is there anyone who really has nothing to give? However, in a world where senses are dulled and minds easily controlled or deceived – mainly through distractions and rootless abstractions – talking about that which is tautological and obvious becomes necessary.

From my own experience with education over more than 40 years, and looking at what is happening in many countries, I see that ‘education for all’ imposes serious limitations on our imaginations – especially in relation to the perceptions and possibilities of how people learn and construct knowledge.

Whether it takes place in school settings, at home or wherever else, education perceives learning as the result of teaching that happens in one direction (from text to teacher/parent to student). It refers to curricula, textbooks, evaluations and certificates and does not acknowledge knowledges that cannot be expressed in words. In addition, education embodies the values of control and winning – which means that success and failure, right and wrong are seen from some objective universal sense, which engenders the belief that students can be compared along measures that claim to be neutral, objective and universal.

In general, ‘Education for all’ avoids serious discussion of the underlying logic, the assumptions, and values that govern perceptions and actions. It marginalizes fundamental aspects in life such as pluralism, wisdom, culture, and the well-being of people, communities and nature.

For example, barely any country considers water as a main theme in its’ curriculum – in spite of the fact that all countries have signed universal declarations and treaties asserting that water is a basic right. Even more disturbing is the fact that clean water is not available to the majority of children around the world today!

There is hardly any educational system that considers the ‘health’ of nature (the ‘holder’ of all creatures and of life) as a main concern for education. Many today carry the banner of “child-centred” education, but if we put all our energies and intelligence on caring for children, and ignore nature, we do not guarantee sustainability of life. The Amerindians had it the other way round: ‘caring for the 7th generation’ which necessarily means not to mess with nature, no matter how much we gain at the personal or economic level.

How can we explain the dearth of such concerns and themes, despite the tremendous destructive impact on children and communities? How can we continue to impose the same curriculum on all children in a given country, in spite of the tremendous differences in their realities and interests? How can we go on comparing children along measures (whether national or international) that claim to be objective and universal?

Such imposition and comparison are downright disrespectful and detrimental to the well-being of children. People learn differently and construct understandings and knowledges in diverse ways that cannot be squeezed under one banner or understood by one super theory. It is interesting that, in spite of the fact that the British colonized many countries, and were exposed to various knowledges, they don’t seem to have realized this fact as yet.
The English language does not have a word that is plural for ‘knowledge’. In contrast, when the British and French first introduced education in the Arab region, the Egyptians used the phrase ‘dar al-ma’aaref’ (house of knowledges) to refer to the Ministry of Education.

The dominant conception and practice in education embodies both monopoly of learning, and disrespect for people. During the past 35 years, I have become increasingly sensitive to, and intolerant of, these two aspects in life - monopoly and disrespect - especially in relation to learning and knowledge. Monopoly is manifested in ‘universal thinking’ or the belief in a single undifferentiated path for progress. And disrespect is manifested by the attitude of ‘helping, educating, empowering, or conscientizing’ people who do not have the symbols and things that we value.

This attitude – in my opinion – usually stems from our ignorance of the tremendous understanding, knowledges and wisdoms that ‘ordinary’ people have. Most often, our conclusion is that they have nothing worthwhile and thus we allow ourselves – often with good intentions – to impose on them what we believe is good for them. Instead of putting the effort into seeing what they have, we follow the lazy path of assuming they have nothing and, thus, need what we think they lack. The problem lies in the underlying logic and in perceptions and relationships the said logic generates.

‘Learning for all and from all’ embodies a different logic and diverse perceptions, convictions and values. It naturally symbolizes a pluralistic attitude towards living, learning and knowing. It exemplifies, for example, knowledges that cannot be expressed in words, concepts and theories. It starts with the conviction that experience, life and being cannot be completely grasped by the tool of thought. They are much richer than what thinking can comprehend and much broader than what any theory or planned education can ever encompass. It, thus, embodies the value of humility, as also the conviction that a lot of learning happens outside the control of institutions and professionals. Such learning needs to be acknowledged, legitimized and even provided for.

What I am trying to say, in short, is that ‘education for all’ is too narrow and too confining for what really happens in the real world and for living an enriching and nurturing life. It distracts us from seeing much of what goes on within us and around us. It ignores understandings that cannot be articulated in words or measured.

Moreover, whereas learning is a word that has equivalents in almost all languages, the word ‘education’ is relatively recent and is artificial and fabricated. When confronted with this fabricated word, first through religious missionaries followed by the secular ones called educators, Arabs could not find a word in Arabic that corresponds to education. Some may look at this as a deficiency, but I look at it as a blessing in disguise, because then there is hope that one day we may discard it and use the many words that exemplify teaching and learning in real settings.

The words that are currently used in Arabic to refer to ‘education’ have their origin elsewhere and mean something different. The three words that are usually used are ta’leem, tarbiya, and tanshi’ah. Ta’leem means teaching and not education, and tarbiya and tanshi’ah refer to upbringing. In other words, while learning and teaching are practiced and experienced by people in their daily lives, education usually requires special institutions that house licensed professionals who have the responsibility for a task called education.

It is also worth mentioning that what is referred to as ‘home schooling’, informal education or non-formal education, embody the same underlying logic – roughly outlined above – and, thus, fall under the broad umbrella of education. In contrast, ‘learning for all and from all’ takes on many diverse meanings, depending on what makes sense to people in their particular situation and reality.

There is no one logic, no one meaning and no one path that underlies learning. The basic ‘ingredient’ is a learner who wants to understand more about what s/he experiences or does, and do it better. To do this, one can use whatever is available and useful to him/her. Fortunately, come what may, learning happens all the time, in ways that can neither be expressed by dominant concepts nor detected by overbearing institutions and professionals. It still happens outside the logic of competition. Probably, the main threats in the world today to this natural ability to learn are the entertainment industry and the consumer society.
Imposing one way of learning – in the name of the right to education – a way that can be controlled and measured by professionals, produces a majority of students who feel useless, incompetent and worthless. We need to question that. For example, we never talk about the 70 to 80% coming out of schools feeling low about themselves and about having wasted many years. It is illegal to force all children to eat the same food or to go to a given restaurant if they don’t like the food there, or to a barbershop if they don’t like the way their hair is cut. However, it is not only legal, but also compulsory, to send a child to school that s/he doesn’t like.

Why is it that when it comes to knowledge, our minds accept compulsory learning and we allow our children to be forced to sit for 12 years studying things that do not make sense to most of them, at the end asking them to sit for the same general exams in order to be measured and evaluated? Calling such coercion a ‘human right’ and a ‘sign of progress’ is beyond my comprehension. It reflects how easy it is to deceive minds through rootless shiny words. Even where it appears that children have a choice concerning curricula, it often boils down to choosing between Coke and Pepsi – not a real choice!

Sooner or later we need to recognize that something needs to be done in relation to this inhuman policy. We need to recognize and admit the unfairness and harm we inflict on children by imposing what is meaningless to them and blaming them for not doing what we expect them to do. One group of people that could embody whole different ways of learning is artists and people who embody beautiful cultural traits in their lifestyles.

Since ‘formal education’ became compulsory and a ‘human right’, young people seem to have become less able to take care of themselves, to produce what they need and to do what can only be learned through life-like parenting. Their self-worth is diminishing and becoming more connected to artificial symbols such as grades. Through education, children learn to lie daily by saying what the teacher and the curriculum want them to say, rather than what they really think, feel or believe. They often repeat words that mean nothing to them, or whose meanings are memorized, but not internalized or understood. The words they use are not rooted in life and their reality. They are less able to manage their daily affairs. Their health, in general, is neglected in schools.

Increasing numbers of students are disillusioned by education, and many feel that curricula are not relevant to their lives. They are losing direction and sense of being and belonging. They suffer from depression, stress and anxiety. They need Viagra to experience a feeling that has been natural throughout the ages. Yet, strangely enough, even parents demand more schools and demand more testing of their children. The big question is: why and who benefits?

It is necessary to stress here that my debate is not between schooling and non-schooling. Those who find schools relevant to their situation should have the freedom to go to school. What I am arguing against is forcing all children to follow one path to accomplish their learning journey. I am protesting against the monopoly of education over learning. I am pleading for diversity in learning and for legitimate acknowledgement of all systems of knowledge.

The well-being of children compels us to depart from universals (including universal meanings and measures) and from the arrogance of the claim that the mind can comprehend experience in its fullness. The mind needs to learn to be humble again and go hand-in-hand with wisdom. We need to regain a belief in pluralism as a natural characteristic of both humanity and Nature, and that universals in whatever form are contrary to both.

Attempts to build a ‘universe’ (which today goes under the guise of globalization), rather than to deepen the ‘pluriverse’ (where various worlds enrich and nurture one another), have not only caused much harm and misery but have also failed. The futility of such a dream is now obvious. One positive aspect of modern technology is that it makes isolation impossible and the pluralistic nature of life more obvious. We need to shape paths that take us out of our provincialities but without dumping us all into a single global culture.

Pluralism is in the nature of all aspects of reality. It does not arise from a purely theoretical source but in response to an existential situation of chaos, disorientation, alienation, worthlessness etc, which many people experience today. The solution in such cases will have to be in the praxis and not in the intellect. Luckily, this is still how life is lived in many communities in the two-thirds World, which means we need to look for societies that still embody this spirit and be inspired by rather than try to ‘develop’ them!
My suggestion to use ‘learning for all and from all’ instead of ‘education for all’ is not just a change of words, but of perceptions: how we perceive self, others, our relationship to the world, and how we perceive learning and knowledge. Anyone who plays with a baby can easily realize how much one learns from him/her. Learning is always mutual in real settings and real life. Why we later ignore this fact, preferring to see people as pure students or pure teachers, is another puzzle I have difficulty comprehending.

In a consumer world where the belief in a single undifferentiated path for progress is so deep, we need to undertake radical shifts in our perceptions and values. For example, the opposite of consumption, for me, is health (health of people, of relationships, and of nature).

Education and knowledge, in their present form, are often hazardous to the health of children and of nature. Competing for symbolic gains such as grades, and carrying the curricula – literally – on their shoulders (as heavy books), and ignoring to subtract the harm that knowledge in those curricula has caused to nature and environments, at least during the past 100 years, have been instrumental to consumption and detrimental to health. It is hard to conceive how health can be a fundamental value in ‘education for all’, whose dominant values seem to be control and winning.

Where should we start? Where change makes most sense: ourselves. We can start by each one of us putting an effort to make sense out of one’s experience and to co-author meanings of words that one uses. This is where learning for all, by all, and from all converges. Making sense of one’s experience and co-authoring of meanings and measures, forms a most crucial element in learning (regardless of how much education the person has acquired). It is crucial in constructing authentic and meaningful knowledges.

Making sense of experience requires much more discipline – inner discipline, mental, social, and spiritual – than what ready knowledge requires. Valuing one’s experience and making sense of it are intimately connected to strengths and to what is beautiful and valuable within a person, but – in general – ignored, belittled, or done mechanically in institutions today. However, we need to differentiate here between aspects of strengths that can be measured and those whose values cannot. This brings us to the aspect of worthiness.

A crucial feature in every person’s life, and for one’s well being, is the source of her/his worth. Instead of coming from abstract symbols that claim to be objective and universal, the worth of a person should stem from one’s inner harmony and from people and the community that the person interacts with daily.

This sense of worthiness of a person is embodied in a great insight and inspiration that was articulated by Imam Ali 1,400 years ago. In Arabic, it says (quemat kullimri’en ma yuhsenoh). Since its establishment in 1998, the Arab Education Forum (AEF) had this insight as its guiding principle in its thinking and practice. It is also true for Al-jame’ah. Indeed, the worth of a person is what s/he yuhsen. Yuhsen, in Arabic, has several meanings, which together constitute the worth of the person:

- The first meaning refers to how well the person does what s/he does, which requires knowledge and skills (itqaan) themselves requiring tremendous mental discipline;
- The second refers to how beautiful and pleasing what one does is to the senses i.e. the aesthetic dimension (shai’un hasan), which requires a high degree of sensitivity;
- The third meaning refers to how good it is for the community (al-’amal al-hasan) in the sense of not harming oneself, others, or surroundings, which requires high moral and ethical standards;
- The fourth refers to how much one gives of oneself and not what one takes from others and delivers as ready made (ihsan/’ataa’), which requires valuing one’s experience;
- The fifth meaning refers to how respectful (of people and ideas) the person is in discussions and interactions with others (wa jaadilhum billatee hiya ahsan), which requires both humility and dignity.

These meanings/dimensions of the word yuhsen are not given by any authority, but by people as they experience life and make sense of it in a particular place and time – by people as co-authors of the various meanings. Meanings of yuhsen gain new dimensions according to people, contexts and times.
concerned. Worthiness, thus, is not a purely intellectual concept but essentially an existential one. It stems from the interaction between the person and her/his surroundings.

Imam Ali’s articulation has been around for more than 1,400 years. All along, it could have – at least in the Arab world – formed a basis of a vision of learning/education that is much more respectful of people and of diversity than that of the dominant one today. It embodies the spirit of wisdom inherent in human beings, by starting with strengths that the person, community, and culture have in healing itself.

A basic question within ‘learning for all and from all’ is: what do you yuhsen? It is an interesting question to ponder upon (this includes you dear reader) in relation to one’s life, in light of the five meanings embedded in the word yuhsen – remembering always that meanings are neither set in stone nor universal; and that the responsibility, right and duty of each person is to co-author the meanings of the words one uses.

Two sources of worthiness have been particularly relevant in my life. Over the years, as a Palestinian, I became increasingly convinced that the British conquered the Palestinians (and others) from within, by shifting the locus of the worth from the person and the community to arbitrary symbols such as grades, degrees and prizes that claim to be objective and universal and whose source and legitimacy came from London (later from Palestinians educated and trained in England).

In the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, the London Matriculation Board became the main measure of the Palestinian students’ worth. Most young people and parents accepted this, despite initial resistance when the British first imposed their educational system. Today, the virus has gone much deeper. One way that helped in spreading it was to equate the tool with the function – in this case, equating education with learning. This has torn apart the “inner worlds” of people and the social-cultural-spiritual-economic fabric of the community. It is this shift that – in my opinion – which underlies the falling apart of most societies in the Two-Thirds World in the 20th century and we still witness its consequences today.

A crucial aspect of conquering people from within – though usually not stated openly – is disvaluing what people, communities and cultures already have, in terms of knowledges, meanings, expressions, measures, beliefs as well as in terms of ways of living, learning, and relating. Such disvaluing was accomplished mainly through three inter-linked means (which on the surface appear good and positive): stressing needs and problems; believing in a single undifferentiated path for progress; and ‘assistance’ that embodies a disrespectful attitude, namely, knowing better than the others what is good for them!

Part of the challenge we face in ‘learning for all and from all’ is to shift the source of worthiness of a person from arbitrary symbols back to the meanings embedded in the word yuhsen, back to inner harmony and to the people and community that the person interacts with daily.

What is important within ‘learning for all and from all’ is not the final product (degree, certificate, or skills, etc) but the learning journey one embarks on. There are no limits as to the learning paths people can take. One can learn without permission (learning for all) and from anyone (learning from all). No one should ever be told s/he cannot take a certain learning path or is unable to learn or has nothing to give.

‘Learning for all and from all’ reminds people that they need not wait to be given a permission to learn but, rather, start their learning journeys with what is available and by walking their own paths. Once we free our imaginations from the one dominant path, we discover endless ways to learn, apprenticeship, in all its forms, being an important one.
where would I be, in which mental space, if I placed myself beyond development and progress? I cannot describe it. I can only talk about it. I can be there, but I do not have the words to share what my gaze reveals.

I would like to relate what I have been observing among people of the barrios and the pueblos. For centuries they resisted colonization and development that invaded their lands and cultures. For many years, they struggled to be included in the spaces, opportunities, or services that were proposed to them as ideals for life, but within which they were continually marginalized.

I want to show how that resistance or that demand for incorporation have been transformed into autonomous initiatives, leaving behind old illusions and exploring new territories. I want to describe how I learned with these people to go beyond ‘development’.

Conventional language, which would seem appropriate for the description that I want to give, contradicts my purpose. Many words in use, like ‘needs’, ‘technology’, ‘participation’, ‘resources’ or ‘environment’ are prohibited to me. They are used as a device that traps all vision within its parameters. This net of concepts spread everywhere, in the name of development, and people very simply adopted the Western perception of reality.

What can I do or say now, having placed myself beyond development? I can turn my attention beyond the world produced by those ‘plastic words’. This means coming out of their shadow and looking on the other side.

Two ruptures

How did I arrive at this space beyond development? My story starts with identifying two moments of rupture that led to three different mentalities, three distinct mental topologies defining my experience: the one I had in the first years of my life, the one I acquired when I got the under-development bug and the one which emerged after healing from it.

The first rupture coincides with a precise date and place: January 20, 1949, Washington, D.C. On the day he took office, President Truman substantially changed the implications of the word ‘development’ by introducing its counterpart: under-development. Truman used it to diagnose a particular misery affecting most human beings and communities outside the United States. Overnight, four fifths of the world’s population found themselves in the undignified condition of being ‘under-developed’.

Development theories and definitions soon proliferated. But as they became more varied and contradictory, the connotations became stronger. Development was taken to mean the state of being on the way towards a goal that others have reached. In exchange for the sacrifice of environments, solidarities, traditional interpretations, social experiences and customs, and at the altar of ever-changing expert advice, the social majorities were offered a magical formula, to escape from the condition of those-who-are-not-yet-but-will-be.

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61. This is an extract of the article ‘Reclaiming the art of living and dying’ available on the Non-formal education webpage of the UNESCO Literacy portal.

62. The word was probably created by Wilfred Benson (The Economic Advancement of Under-developed Areas, in The Economic Basis of Peace, 1942, National Peace Council, London) but nobody before Truman took it seriously.
Truman succeeded in what had been impossible for Churchill: prolonging the colonial yoke. Thanks to the myth of development, ‘natives’ everywhere were transformed into the ‘under-developed’ to be modernized and transformed by professional educators, social engineers and manpower planners.

Many assume enthusiastically that under-development is an opportunity for liberation. This state implies the promise and hope of becoming developed. It is true that the development enterprise changed the face of the world. But it took place in a way contrary to what was promised. In the 1950’s, Leontief estimated that countries such as Brazil or Mexico would require 20 or 30 years to catch up. Following the most recent estimate, a country like Mauritania would require more than two thousand years to catch up and Mexico or Brazil should need only a few centuries. And the gap continues to grow.

Development seems to be very good business for the rich and very bad business for the others. The so-called poor already knew very well what we are just discovering. Far from being discouraged or frustrated, they reacted to this awareness with a rich variety of initiatives to regenerate their commons. They were confronting, just as they continue to do today, severe restrictions and threats from developers - whose impetus was weakened but not dead – but they were not looking for charity or affluence. They only asked for what development has denied to them – an opportunity to create their own livelihood, regulate their own commons and live in dignity. It still remains their claim.

The second rupture came thirty years later. In 1985, at the triennial conference of the Society for International Development, I dared to suggest that the future of development studies was to be found in archaeology. I had the impression that the development era was coming to an end. In spite of many attempts to prolong its’ agony or even resurrect it, the possibility of a new era, beyond development, was emerging.

Allow me to now describe the three topologies of the mind defined by those two moments of rupture.

It is not difficult to speak about the first topology as a child who was not as yet under-developed. I had a tradition, and the dream of continuing and enriching it. I had a place in the world and concrete customs. These gave a direction to my daily life: how to address adults, or to pray; what to do in the case of birth or death and so on.

At that time, I was navigating in the divergent traditions of my parents - the indigenous ancestry of my mother that she was trying to forget or even eliminate and the supposed aristocratic ancestry of my Creole father, which made him nostalgic.

My home was the second house built in a new, middle class section of Mexico City. From time to time, a turkey seller would pass through our street and I was the one who chose which turkey would be fed on the roof of our house for the next two months in preparation for our Christmas meal.

My grandmother Dolores (or Loló as we called her) had five daughters in different cities. Until the end of her life, she continued to visit them. She stayed with each of them for a few months, waiting at each house for a baptism, a marriage, a particular fiesta. During her visits to us, she could not come to my house through the front door. She was an Indian. And her grandchildren were part of a plot to hide her from the eyes of my father, who should not see her (I don’t know exactly why). She never had a penny. But the little she could grasp here and there was immediately used to buy something for all of us.

Every year, on holiday, I asked to be taken to her in Oaxaca, a magnificent Indian and colonial city in the South of Mexico. One of her daughters tended a stall in Oaxaca’s market. I played around the market place with other kids, enjoying a freedom already impossible in Mexico City. In spite of the many restrictions that my mother imposed on her, I was learning a way of being with my grandmother, an art of living and dying that she was able to protect and enrich throughout her life.

In such a world, everything was familiar but with every day came a new surprise. One year, when she was 95 years old, my grandmother was particularly joyful in every fiesta. “This will be my last marriage... or my last Christmas”, she kept saying with a magnificent smile explaining why she was so

happy. She started to call me, to tell me stories that my mother had previously tried to hide. One night she invited two of her daughters and five of her favourite grandsons and granddaughters for a special dinner. After offering us a magnificent meal, as we remembered later, she kissed us in a very special way. She then went to bed where she died in her sleep. She knew very well the art of dying, as a natural expression of her magnificent art of living.

It is also easy to speak of the second topology of my mind once I caught the ‘under-development’ bug. Everything became déjà vu but at the same time was entirely new. My dreams got tinted by the fantastic images of prosperity I had seen in Hollywood movies. They showed the American lifestyle as the new image of Heaven. I still clearly remember my fascination at the first mall, set up by Sears & Roebuck a few blocks from my middle class home.

Our tianguis and traditional markets became dirty, incoherent, chaotic. The market of Oaxaca suddenly became a cherished, folkloric curiosity. I still respected and loved the world of my grandmother. But clearly I did not want it for myself nor for my offspring. Nor for my country for that matter! My nation and people desperately needed to be ‘developed’ -- and I wanted to be part of that epic venture.

For that purpose, I could no longer appeal to my customs, experiences or traditions. Only expert advice, education and professional handbooks would help. I came under a system of permanent education. Everything I was learning in school or in my professional life rapidly become obsolete. If I wanted to keep apace with ‘development’, I had to learn as fast as possible. Every day, the next new lesson must be mastered. In this way, I could run and win, fulfilling duties to myself, to my family and my country.

The turkey seller became an extinct species, together with the shoe-repair man, who used to sit at our door step, chatting with us and drinking the lemon water that my mother offered to him while he worked.

In 1937, a year after I was born, the National Congress of Architects submitted an urgent plea to the President of Mexico. If he did not heed to their proposals immediately, our beautiful ‘City of Palaces’, already overcrowded with one million people, would, in 50 years, be transformed into an urban monster of two million people! Later, in 1951, just two years after Truman’s speech, this same group of architects advised the President on how to accelerate the growth of our city, explaining how they could manage a glorious capital of five million people. During the 50 years of their imagination, the reality of development has transformed it into a city of 20 million.

This brings me to the third topology. In half a century, cities have transmogrified the very definition of human nature. My gaze beyond development is difficult to articulate, but always shows me the painful losses we have endured and the terrible suffering imposed on my people, on the people I love.

According to Arthur Miller, an era concludes when the main illusions keeping it going are depleted. For many of us, in the ‘under-developed world’, this is now the case. We are no longer living in that era and pre-development no longer exists. No place has escaped the developers.

Where are we then? How can we write about this peculiar condition in which more and more of us find ourselves today? We are not suggesting any form of return, any kind of fundamentalism or even less the idea of closing ourselves off in an isolated corner of the globe. We have not, as yet, the proper words to describe our gaze, our ways of seeing and experiencing. We can be there, beyond development, but unable to speak our thoughts. Formal categories are useless or even ordinary words. We are once again seeing with our own eyes. But our eyes do not speak. And we have not yet created the new discourse, to describe what our gaze discerns.

For us, under-development is not the opposite of development. It is a pejorative disqualification, based on the simplistic assumption of some unilateral evolution of societies. The opposite of development, in fact, is humility. – to accept with respect that others exist, that their existence, ways, gods and hopes, should be respected. We are now walking along our own paths, trying to regenerate our own dreams and attempting to rebuild our commons as the world seems to fall apart and old paradigms collapse.
Beyond needs

To go beyond development does not mean a step further in the same direction. It dissolves the very essence of the development paradigm: the perception of a unique ideal of life inside economic societies.

By acknowledging that there is a fundamental cultural relativity among peoples on Earth, people liberated from ‘development’ are now able to propose their own redefinition of quality of life. This is not a new paradigm, another universal ideal to offer as an ideological substitute for development (like globalization), but the opening to a thousand different forms in which peoples and cultures may conceive ideals of life and social organization.

In the 70s, Paul Streeten argued that success in reaching the goals of economic growth was the cause of hunger and misery. Given the limits to growth, identified by the Club of Rome in 197264, new campaigns were launched, focussing on efforts that enable the under-developed to fulfil their ‘basic needs’.

He proposed the Basic Needs Approach, parallel to development, in order to improve the condition of the social majorities65. Such orientation put aside all debate about development itself and has permeated most strategies and programmes ever since.

After the Basic Needs Approach, most social strategies and programmes were conceived to fulfil the needs of the ‘deprived’. It is not easy to challenge such a well-rooted premise of the modern mind. Only a few recognize the historical roots of the present notion of needs.

In the late 70s, I had the opportunity to attend some Public Assemblies for Investment, organized by a presidential candidate to promote his nomination. In a remote village in Central Mexico, I saw officials of almost every agency promoting goods and services to satisfy ‘basic needs’: drinking water, credits, roads, schools, jobs...

At the end of the Assembly, don Chuy spoke for one of the communities. “We are so poor”, he said, “that we don’t have any of the needs mentioned by our compañeros. We only want to continue living. But now they are even preventing us from doing that.” Almost everyone laughed, attributing to him typical campesino ignorance.

But in conversation with don Chuy later, he described his people’s success in preventing ‘development’ from invading their perception. I heard the language of a people with their feet firmly attached to their soil. In don Chuy’s town, people did not have ‘needs’. They were too busy living and too fully aware of the restrictions they lived under. They looked for remedies that allowed them to flourish and endure on their own terms. No development institution showed interest in assisting them in such endeavours.

‘Needs’, as understood in contemporary society, have emerged with capitalism and the enclosure of the commons. People that until then were living their own lives, in their own ways, were suddenly in desperate need of a job, food, housing. Simultaneously, scarcity was established as the organizing principle of social life. The economy was disembodied from culture, and instituted as an autonomous sphere at the centre of politics and ethics66.

The pursuit of development in the post-war era brought ‘needs’ to the centre of the Western political discourse and gave new appeal to the term. It provided managers with a philanthropic rationale for the destruction of cultures.

By claiming respect for the autonomy of our commons, we are attempting to go beyond development, to regenerate our own notion of a good life. We perceive this to be, once again, a cultural expression, alive and changing – the expression of a community well-rooted in its’ traditions and soil.

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It represents a new search for freedom, justice and radical pluralism. Based on the assumption of cultural relativity\(^{67}\), it claims autonomous paths for the unique and locally-rooted lifestyles for the peoples constituting the majority of the earth’s population.

While scholars, NGOs and governments are still looking for development alternatives, we have begun looking for and materializing alternatives to development. We will never be like the peoples in the North. We don’t wish to ‘develop’. This awareness is neither driving us to the cynical acceptance of injustice, nor to the desperate search for alternative means to the same ends. It is giving us the occasion to celebrate. For, in our cultural terms, it means abandoning the project for the Westernization of the world and finally following our own path again. We are now healing from Western civilization, as Gandhi once suggested.

**Alternative development**

Going back to my journey through the 1960s and 70s, I can see that I dramatically changed paths several times... just to stay in the same place.

After 1953, I threw myself enthusiastically into my profession, guided by Jesuits who wanted to train business leaders with a social conscience. They spoke continuously about service and commitment. The fact of having to work to sustain my family while I continued my studies turned out to be a great advantage: I could immediately apply everything I learned at university. Development ceased to be a purpose or a possibility. It was a necessity and a proof at the same time. Its categories were but a description of ‘reality’.

Since I was a member of the first graduating class of my profession, it was possible to climb quickly up the professional ladder. I reached high posts in some businesses. In the corporate world it was possible to cheat the community or exploit workers, but impossible to stop giving money to the shareholders. In the practice of my profession it did not seem possible to live a decent and dignified life. I decided to abandon it.

Soon thereafter I was incorporated into a clandestine movement that aimed "to create a revolution." Our endless discussions around the theory and practice of the revolution progressed as fast as our specific preparations for the guerrilla army, which we handled in great secrecy. One incident altered the whole process. One of our leaders killed another because of a woman. Since his capture for the crime would imply that we all go to prison, we dedicated ourselves to protecting him and taking him out of the country. The situation seemed absurd: a revolutionary group dedicating all its efforts to protect a murderer. It was also a revelation. It revealed to me the violence that we were imposing on ourselves and that we wished to impose on all of society. I decided to abandon that path and subscribed to non-violence.

There seemed to be no option for me but public office. I thought that from there we could drive the realization of our ideas. We had abandoned certain means but not the ends\(^{68}\).

Within the Secretariat of the Presidency in 1966, I soon participated in general public expenditure plans, and particularly in in-depth studies of the situation in the countryside. In 1970, when a populist president took office in Mexico, I occupied a privileged position in his administration from which I could conceive and implement programmes that would benefit millions of people, especially campesinos. The results were so important that after the change in administration I was faced with the foreboding task of occupying an even more important position, perhaps even at the highest level.

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67. Cultural relativity is the opposite to universalism and cultural relativism. It assumes plural realities – and as a consequence of truth – beyond ideologies and modes of perception. The notion has been elaborated by Raimón Panikkar. See, in particular,  

68. For various reasons, the option of creating a political party to conquer power peacefully seemed to be discarded.
By then, however, I had two clear convictions:

1) The logic of decision-making in the government, which I had been able to observe from a good balcony, did not correspond with the logic of the interests of the majority of the people.

2) Development programmes, including those as good as the ones that we carried out, caused more harm than good for their supposed beneficiaries.

To continue in government, especially with increased responsibilities, seemed incompatible with what I knew and thought. I felt forced to leave that path. I began to create independent civil society organizations with a few friends, which in those days began to be called Non-Governmental Organizations, NGOs.

I sincerely believed that the adverse consequences of the development programmes that I had been promoting were solely due to their bureaucratic structure. Without the interference of governmental bureaucracy and ideology, or its corrupted networks, it would be possible for development to make sense for the people and have positive outcomes.

Above all, we had to direct our activities with appropriate research. To this end, we created the Comité Promotor de Investigaciones para el Desarrollo Rural (Committee for Promoting Research for Rural Development). Soon thereafter we formed a coordinating structure for the numerous NGOs that we had created. We named it Análisis, Desarrollo y Gestión, ANADEGES: Analysis, Development and Gestion.

This detailed description of my life path is meant to show the way in which certain ideological and practical turns, which seem substantive, were only variants of the same thing – development. The private corporate world, a clandestine group with revolutionary pretensions, the government, and non-governmental organizations are very different entities, with very different orientations and practices.

But in none of them were we escaping the mental framework of development. To understand the circumstances that made a genuine turnaround possible in the 1980s, I need to go backwards once again in the story that I am relating.

Observing the campesinos

In the 1960s, when we were looking for the social bases for our revolutionary movement, I had to go to Puente de Ixtla, in the state of Guerrero – a tense and difficult zone in which, according to our friends, we could find appropriate interlocutors for our programme.

When we arrived, there was already a significant gathering of campesinos. The tense atmosphere underscored the importance our meeting. We quickly went over the demands, the denunciations of all the wrongs done to them by the market, the caciques, the State. The campesinos wanted to hear our proposals. We gave a beautiful speech to demonstrate the need for organization. We are already organized, they told us. What else do we need? This was the best part of our speech: class consciousness, revolutionary vocation, political and ideological commitment, firmness in the fulfilment of the programme.

We have all of this, they said. What else? We looked at each other. We knew they were trustworthy people. We had to say it. Weapons?, we asked timidly. We have those too, they said. What else?

The episode marked me. It was the first time that I learned to be humble before campesinos.

In those years, at the heart of the Secretariat of the Presidency, I had the opportunity to study the situation of the Mexican countryside in depth - or as in depth as is possible from the view of a balcony.

I was able to advance, with other friends, in formulating theoretical explanations for the situation of the campesinos and their perspectives. We were so convinced of the value of our explanations

69. Gestión has no clear equivalent in English. It means something like management or administration, particularly in expressions like autogestión, self-management, as in a cooperative. It also means to follow a procedure to obtain something, particularly from a public agency, like ‘gestionar’ permits, resources, etc. Both meanings were included in our name.

70. The ‘we’ I am using here alludes to a group of Marxist friends also concerned with the plight of the campesinos. I must mention particularly Juan Castaignts, with whom I worked for a long time on our theoretical elaborations. His doctoral dissertation, La decision economique chez les paysans traditionnels, was clearly to the point.
and so anxious to carry out a thorough investigation that would allow us to test it (in theory, at least) that we began to look into where we could do it. We soon found one that seemed to be ideally set up for our purposes.

The Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares (CONASUPO) was the last of a series of entities that regulated the market of basic subsistence articles. In a document submitted to the management of CONASUPO, I proposed that:

• State efforts to modernize ‘backward’ agriculture and support ‘subsistence’ campesinos – ten million people – have failed. This sector seems like a bottomless barrel, in which the State continuously pours resources that do not remedy the situation of the campesinos, nor improve the productive conditions of the sector.

• The failure should be attributed to a mistaken diagnosis: ‘backwardness’ being attributed to ‘lack’: lack of education, capital, irrigation, credit etc.

An alternative hypothesis proposed, to the problem of subsistence agriculture, lies in its terms of trade. In their interactions with the market, campesinos lose their entire economic surplus; they are thus impoverished and cannot advance. A new investigation is proposed to examine all of the variables of the rural economy, to test the hypothesis and conceive programmes that address the current problems, through changes in the terms of trade in the countryside.

Obviously, I supported the proposal with many studies that gave the hypothesis a solid theoretical and analytical foundation. Since the advances in the investigation were more than satisfactory and abundantly ‘demonstrated’ our hypothesis, I was encouraged to make an integrated and complex proposal for institutional action.

Given that all of the exchanges made by campesinos, when buying or selling goods and services, were an opportunity for them to be exploited and to lose their economic surplus, the idea was for CONASUPO to intervene and regulate directly or indirectly those exchanges for the benefit of the campesinos.

The programme was a success. The budget of CONASUPO grew by one thousand percent in four years and its activities diversified enormously. This money was used to attend to the diverse ‘avenues’ through which the surplus generated by campesinos was leaking. After a couple of years of experience, with very innovative actions based on a wide participation of the campesinos and their organizations, an attempt was made to create an effective model of what was called a ‘development micro-centre’.

Although there was never enough time to establish many micro centres and observe their evolution over a long period, the ones that we were able to organize showed the validity of the hypothesis and opened up an effective path for the development of the campesinos!

Throughout the 1970s, there was intense worldwide debate on campesinos, their reality and their destiny. The debate was particularly intense in Mexico. My participation in it was at first based on my studies of the 1970s and the research I did within CONASUPO. But very soon I took the road showed to me by Teodor Shanin, whose essay, Nature and logic of the rural economy, fell into my hands around that time. It is interesting to recall what it meant.

Teodor was once called the ‘Emperor of the Peasants’. And yes, in a certain way he was so. Against all orthodoxy, Shanin was able to show the value and meaning of rural cultures and their decisive role in the construction of a porvenir, of any porvenir. Guided by Shanin and some other authors, but also by what I learned with rural campesinos, I intervened in a debate in which the urgency to characterize them had the explicit purpose of establishing a political position with respect to them. I continued to work for many years, yet with the same analytical instruments.

I still think, to this day, that those tools left by Marx to study capitalism (particularly the Marx recuperated by Shanin) are the most appropriate for examining that regime of production. I am still convinced that class analysis is indispensable for understanding what happens in capitalist societies.

71. The National Company of Popular Subsistence(s).
72. Our notion of relaciones de intercambio included a lot more that the translation I chose to use, in terms of trade.
By the 1970s however, I was able to prevent those fascinating theories from loosing touch with reality, from forming autonomous (and to some degree autarchic) conceptual systems. Their validity is attributed to their internal coherence and structure (neohegelian, or rather neokantian styles) through which Marxist followers have roamed, but also a sizeable number of conventional thinkers, particularly among the economists. They can be enormously useful for shedding light on reality, to contribute to understanding it. But their character should not be confused: they are not reality. Still less should that construction be imposed on reality.

In the 1980s, while promoting the development of the campesinos and of Mexico had become a national obsession - modifying the concept of development, as well as the strategies for reaching it, along the way, my rupture with the development consensus took place. The invention of the tradifas, however, which was based on extensive research that I had been able to carry out in the popular barrios of some cities, particularly in the capital, happened when I had begun to increasingly resent the prison of the development myth. It had turned into an intellectual and practical straightjacket that I considered necessary to tear off. And I did.

**Burying the myth**

Today, I look with horror at the notes I threw at my poor students in the School of Economics of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Facultad de Economía of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) in 1972. It was evident that none of the conventional notions of development satisfied me. What was then coming out of my mouth and pen was just another form of confusion.

In those years my principal difficulty was the incapacity to process my daily experiences at the grassroots level. There was no way to understand them in the categories in which I had been educated. I was fully conscious of the fact that words are windows of perception, matters of thought. We see according to the words we use. I needed to increase my vocabulary. I thought that by studying more of economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, philosophy, I would be able to better grasp the reality I was immersed in.

My studies took me in all directions. Those in economics, which had in fact begun with Marx twenty years earlier, led me to win a National Award in Political Economy in 1978. None of it helped me to better understand my experiences at the grassroots, particularly in the rural and indigenous world.

One day, I do not know how or why, I decided to try my luck without all those words, to take off those lenses for seeing the world. I have told the episode a thousand times and I still have not managed to describe with precision what it was, what brought it about, what were its circumstances. What I remember is the nightmare of blindness – the situation in which one finds oneself walking out into the light after having been in the darkness for a long time. You cannot see anything. There I was. Unable to see. Blind and mute. Without words.

Soon I realized that the word ‘development’ was in the centre of a fantastic semantic constellation, incredibly powerful and far-reaching. The words that formed it were like the buoys of a net. It suddenly became entirely obvious to me that those words, those categories, had been functioning like ante-ojos, but instead of being a prosthesis that bettered my vision and corrected the defects of my eyes, what I saw was the ante-ojos themselves.

I suddenly went back to the experiences of my childhood, with my grandmother. Remembering her world re-vitalised me. Somehow I dared to see with her eyes, that is, to imagine how her gaze would have been, to try to put myself in her position. This quickly became a channel for entering into daily discovery, when instead of reducing my experiences in the communities to my own conceptual system, to my words and ideas, I tried to learn theirs, to lean out of the windows that they opened with their own words and, in that way, be amazed by the landscapes that they showed me, all of which were new to me.

I was in this state of enchantment when I came across Ivan Illich. Rodolfo Stavenhagen invited me to a seminar at El Colegio de México (a centre of academic excellence), in which Wolfgang Sachs would

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73. Literally translated as glasses, broken up in this way the word means *ante* – before, *ojo* – eye...what stands between the eye and the reality it is seeing.
present his argument on the social construction of energy and Ivan Illich would participate. It was at the beginning of 1983. I listened to Ivan at the seminar. That night I did not sleep, reading for the first time one of his works. I began to visit Ivan often and we eventually became friends.

At the beginning, what took me by surprise, and fascinated me, was pretty simple. Ivan’s discourse included key words like vernacular and conviviality. I had frequently heard them in the barrios and communities and I started to wonder to what extent Ivan’s discourse might have been a well articulated, solid and brilliant manner of expressing what the people at the grassroots were saying. This question has continued to accompany me and we have been trying to answer it in through a working group that we launched just before Ivan’s death. On the other hand, I found hints, bits of information and arguments that seemed to completely clarify the panorama in terms of development as a mobilizing myth: its creation, ascent, decline and death.

During the following years I dedicated myself with great passion, in Mexico and abroad, to burying the myth. Before describing what happened, however, I would like to touch upon the notion of planning.

The mentality of planning has spread throughout economic societies and defines the daily behaviour of millions of people. The elderly woman who seeks advice on how to invest her pension funds, or the students who study the market for the services they are learning to deliver are some examples. It is a mechanism which assumes scarcity and allocation of limited means to unlimited ends, the assumption in which economic society is maintained. This is combined with the assumption that it is possible to predict the future and also to control it.

An alternative attitude, which thinks of the ‘porvenir’, not of the future, defines the radical contrast between hopes and expectations. ‘Porvenir’ is not exactly ‘things to come’, as it says in the dictionary. ‘Porvenir’ is what may happen to someone, to one particular person, not to anyone. The word ‘future’, in contrast, can be applied to anyone and everyone.

Planning refers to future, not to porvenir. When we speak of a ‘porvenir’, we speak of hopes. We buy a lottery ticket with the hope that we will get the prize. Nobody can assure us of winning. When we say that someone has a brilliant ‘porvenir’, we are expressing our hopes that his or her success will correspond to the qualities we observe today in that person – his or her talents, skills, merit.

The ‘porvenir’ of anyone is a radical novelty, a surprise, something that may or may not happen. Our death looms in our porvenir as a certainty, but with radical uncertainty about the moment it will come. Less and less people can still master the art of living and dying to the point of feeling with anticipation, like my grandmother, the moment of their death.

Planning means to reduce everyone to a ‘nobody’. Planning cannot accept the surprise, the novelty, of one’s porvenir. It instead requires from all of us that we give up every hope, offering in exchange every form of expectation.

Since planning is conceived under the assumption of scarcity, every plan is forced to recognize that it will fail to fulfil all expectations. We are thus forced to behave like a mass in panic, as in a fire or an earthquake, trying to be the ones who will be able to escape disaster. In doing so, we have lost our last hope.

According to official estimates, only 10% of all graduates of Mexican universities will ever be able to work in whatever they studied. To my surprise, this official prediction did not provoke a scandal and the sensible reaction of giving up. The students increased their dedication, ignoring the observation that those who get a job after graduation will get it for reasons not associated with the academic results, but with family relations, economic position, etc. As a consequence, nine of every 10 graduates will not only see the frustration of their expectations, but will also be convinced that their failure is their own fault.

In my world, no one seems interested in everyday promises of private or public planners. We have hopes, personal or collective hopes. We hope for our porvenir and oppose any promised future. I arrived at this point after a long journey and a difficult relationship with the myth of development.
Beyond development

The idea of post-development became a fashion in the 80s. I began to meet with Illich and his friends in various parts of the world. We wanted to discuss: “After development, what?” or better still, “What is to be beyond development?” It was not about exploring a new future phase, once the era of development was over, but rather examining, in the present, the condition of those of us who had left the myth behind.

After three years of conversations we decided to share our reflections in a book, which took the shape of a dictionary: The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power.

Sachs describes the conception of the book as follows:

_The development discourse is composed of key concepts. It is impossible to talk about development without referring to concepts such as poverty, production, the notion of the state or equality. These concepts have emerged from modern Western history and were only then projected on the rest of the world. Each crystallizes a set of tacit assumptions which reinforce the western worldview._

To facilitate this intellectual review, each chapter dips into the archaeology of the key concepts under examination and draws ones attention to its ethnocentric and even violent nature.

I wrote the chapter on ‘development’ and would surely write it differently today. I believe that my convictions have strengthened and I have more clarity on the matter. However I am still convinced of everything I wrote in that article about what it means to exist beyond development.

In that essay, I introduced my idea of a new type of commons created by common men. Who are they? How should I describe them?

The talk of common men all over the world, in the barrios and pueblos, is not the gabble, noise, anarchic and chaotic behaviour of disconcerted individuals, even if it may seem so to the conventional wisdom of both the right and left.

When common men dream, they recognize that there are permanent tensions and conflicts between their autonomous forms of existence and the prevailing order, which has surrendered to the economy in all its’ political shapes: liberal democracy, corporative state or personal, theocratic or class dictatorship.

Common men dream of types of social organization more favourable to their activities. They need a new legal order, based on full respect and recognition for their new commons. They also need a new social framework, to implement the transition from social consensus – for homogenized individuals, for economic men – to social accord – for differentiated groups, for common men in their new commons.

The dream of common man, as expressed with increasing vigour in new social movements, has stemmed from the struggle for the protection and defence of his autonomy. It is consolidated in the creation of his new commons and has started to articulate the passage from the consensus of a majority of homogenized individuals towards political agreement among autonomous groups. By shaping such agreements, common man has been fostering the enforcement and formulation of a new legal order imposing stringent limitations to the economy, subordinating it to politics.

The new dynamics of common man does not appear as a utopian design or a universal political proposal that should be carried forward to become generalized. It stems from concrete experiences, materializing dreams and rekindling hopes among those who live on the margins of economic societies and constitute their majorities.

Formal or representative democracy could be a good ‘political umbrella’ for their undertakings only if, and when, the mandate of legitimately chosen representatives is limited and concentrated on supporting the new commons. This reformulation of the State and of social institutions, turning upside down the domination of the economy over society and politics to confine it to the margins, would only be possible through extended ‘citizens’ coalitions.
In neighbourhoods, in barrios and in villages, spaces of freedom have been spawning, where autonomy and the art of living of the people on the margins, are being exercised more fully. It would be very interesting for those who are still immersed in the centre of economic societies, fascinated by the dependence on the market or plan, to be able to witness their experiences and listen to their arguments. They are being called upon for a constant and free enrichment of their lives, in the daily materialization of autonomous hope.

What common man does today, in these spaces, cannot be defined as a ‘survival strategy’. Neither could it be called an attachment to a way of life devoted to ‘mere subsistence’, an expression filled with prejudices and simultaneously connoting ‘living conditions exposed to severe restrictions’ and ‘an incapacity to achieve modern comfort’. Even those who accept that the initiative of common man may be more efficient and adequate than the development efforts or the ‘wars against poverty’, refuse to see a living ideal in what common man is doing. They rather believe that any of the on-going reforms of economic societies will allow, someday, the achievement of better conditions for all. Still others maintain an attitude of realistic scepticism and a certain degree of cynicism, recognizing the limited capacities of economic societies to secure welfare and justice for all, but accepting that state of affairs.

Before reacting with sociological imagination, traditional man was strongly attracted by industrial technology, which coloured the twentieth century all over the world. The experience of development, however, allowed him to see the counter productivity which characterizes industrial technology. In his new spaces, common man has perceived the need to prudently accelerate technological change. He often focuses on technological creation, carefully examining the relative value of traditional empirical techniques, then using his own familiar and industrial tools to ascertain the extent to which the former or the latter can be inadequate or counterproductive.

Many campesinos already know, for example, that their technology of slash-and-burn is now entirely inappropriate for the limited spaces they presently have to sow. They also know that industrial fertilizers and agro-chemicals may be very harmful to their health and that of the soil. They now creatively combine their ancient knowledge of micro-climates with more recent innovations of agronomy in order to adopt more sensible patterns. The practices of recycling industrial products and of bootlegging have given valuable lessons to those who undertake these activities in the grassroots barrios within cities. The latter not only have the opportunity of mastering the technological secrets of industrial gadgets, but also have been able to keep their distance from them, de-mystifying the magic of the wrapping, brand or make, and their supposedly fantastic advantages. Both in dreams and in practices, common man increasingly incorporates a careful selection of the industrial technologies, often after reformulating their use or design, as well as the constant creation of technical or technological innovations.

The new commons are contemporary ways of life, sound spaces for comfortable living, a sociological novelty updating tradition and reappraising modernity. They have been conceived in an era in which all what men and women need for their quality of life can be provided for, given the technical means now available. They have also been conceived for an era in which the non-economic ways of providing for everything would allow men and women to look freely for what they want with dignity and wisdom.

Every era has to come to an end. If men recognize that in time and dare to be surprised by the emerging events, the old era dies with dignity and peace and the new one flourishes with joy and passion. Otherwise, dying becomes a chronic condition, all kinds of pests spread around the unburied corpse, and the new era must be built on the ruins of the old. The time has come for the end of the economic era. Evidences of the new era, appearing everywhere are still perceived as anomalies of the old.

What I would like to emphasize by bringing in these thoughts is that, ultimately, my learning took shape not so much through my readings, or with Ivan, but through my experiences at the grassroots. It was what was happening in the barrios and pueblos, what I saw and felt around me that pushed me to change my perceptions and bury the development myth.

For many years what came to my mind, was clearly against both conventional and alternative thinking. Lack of formal training in all the disciplines that dealt with the questions involved, the profound contradictions experienced with respect to the academic and political world, were like heavy stones tied to my feet, keeping me at the bottom. I think I could not embark on this adventurous new path had I not found a new kind of legitimacy with personalities like Ivan.
A dominated culture is an under-estimated culture, devalued even in the eyes of those who create it, live in it and with it. When a devalued culture is not that of a minority, but that of half the population of a country, containing centuries of experiences and leading the country to be much more than it currently is, the whole country is devalued, under-estimated.

From promotion to co-motion

Slowly I came to the conviction that the campesinos were not searching for development. What I was hearing drove me to propose to my friends and colleagues that we change the name of the organization ANADEGES that we had created in 1982. What we thought we were bringing to campesinos (analysis, development and ‘gestión’) was not what they wanted or needed. Instead of analysis and development they were actually struggling to affirm their autonomy. I proposed that our organization be called Autonomía, Descentralismo y Gestión (Autonomy, Decentralism and Gestión)74. It was not very difficult to get them to accept this change, although over time I realized that acceptance did not imply abandonment of previous convictions.

I set in motion another autonomous organization, called Opción, a social project of communication. Opción was created in 1984 as a non-profit NGO, with the purpose of building an autonomous way of satisfying the communication needs of popular urban and rural groups, both among themselves and with society at large.

The original conception of Opción was that the organization would serve as a common space and “umbrella” for a variety of initiatives in the field of communications. It was thought that the organizations and groups associated with, or related to ANADEGES, as well as other social groups, individuals, and popular organizations could find in Opción an appropriate support for their projects and activities. In the conception of Opción great importance was attached to the principle of economic self-sufficiency. Full autonomy in its basic operation was sought. The many ‘projects’ or ‘initiatives’ taken by its members or associates can have varied degrees of autonomy, depending on their nature.

Opción placed special emphasis on publishing materials75. They catered to the participants’ own need for publications and provided access to books and material that were not easily attainable. They also supported by documenting and editing ideas, techniques, experiences etc. generated by the groups themselves, with the purpose of sharing the same with others76.

Based on its’ experiences, Opción decided to promote a Red Intercultural de Creación Tecnológica (Intercultural Network of Technological Creation) in the mid-1990s.

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74. The acronym ANADEGES – for Analysis, Development and Gestión- was thus maintained, though built on new foundations.

75. El verdepinto. This is a periodical of the CITA, dedicated to the spread of ideas in alternative technology and practices. CITA itself and the publication received financial support from GTZ, of Germany, for some time. Catalogues. For many years, catalogues of publications in the field of communication in Spanish have been published. Opciones. From 1992 to 1994 Opción prepared this weekly supplement in the newspaper El Nacional, to disseminate ideas, experiences, techniques, etc. that showed an alternative vision to the dominant one, with an emphasis on the conceptions and initiatives emanating from the grassroots or radical thinkers. Other publications. Opción edited and published diverse books and magazines, conceived and carried out by members or associates of the organization, or by a group they are in contact with. In every case, the publications are related to the basic purposes of Opción, which did not act as a service provider in this field, but rather as an active participant in the projects that it accepts to take. Among the books that it has edited, by itself or in association with other organizations, the following stand out: Comunicación y democracia; En torno a la identidad latinoamericana; Las industrias culturales; Generación de conocimiento y formación de comunicadores; Por una nueva política alimentaria; La lucha por Chimalapas 1987-1992: una experiencia de concertación.

76. To this end, it kept in operation a bookstore specializing in communications texts (the best in the country in that field). This store was, at the same time, the central link in an informal network through which books and materials related to communication were distributed. These books are sold in the majority of communications schools in Mexican universities and in a good number of Latin American universities. Some of the publications distributed, which include magazines in whose edition Opción is directly involved (like Comunicación y cultura), are delivered to some universities as a donation, based on the financing of foundations.
The aims were:

- Intercultural – defined by the relationship between people and groups of different cultures, ideological or political affiliations, residents of diverse physical and cultural spaces, within and beyond Mexico
- Network – an organization that is informal, decentralized, horizontally structured, with no prerequisites to access, but with operating and functioning rules, open in time and space
- Technological creation – devoted to creating
- Techno-logics – using patterns of technical and institutional tools
- Technologies – tools that expand individual capacities through the good use, criticism, enrichment and transformation of existing techno-logics and technologies
- Experimentation with innovations.

Through this network, Opción emphasized

- The systematic criticism of industrial society, in interaction with people and groups from different parts of the world.
- The demystification of the promises of ‘development’ and ‘industrialisation’, showing its’ lack of viability and meaning for the world’s majorities;
- the revaluation of the knowledge and experiences of traditional societies, making evident their capacity to reformulate the technical and institutional tools contributed by industrial society, with the purpose of combining them with traditional empirical heritage for the cultural creation of techno-logics and technologies appropriate to the needs and desires of each individual, group, and culture.
- The existence of a wide network of people and groups that, within and beyond Mexico, are attempting to put into practice initiatives resulting from the systematic criticism of industrial society, in their concrete physical and cultural spaces.
- The availability of ample documentation and directories that offer concrete information about knowledge and experiences that can support and enrich such initiatives, or the bibliographical or human hints that can lead to obtaining such knowledge and experiences.
- The availability of material resources and people who are capable of carrying out project tasks or the existence of contacts and relations that allow the acquisition of those that are lacking.

Beyond the critique of development, I entered into a profound discussion on the very idea of intervention.

Humility, the radical openness to the otherness of the other, to diversity, seemed to express an alternative attitude. So I proposed to stop all forms of ‘promotion’ and switch over to co-motion.

On the one hand, this attitude acknowledges the inherent character of the idea ‘promotion.’ To promote means to assume one of two things: that the ‘other’ is paralyzed (which is almost never true) or that the ‘other’ is in motion, but going in the wrong direction. This intervention in the life of others, which is habitually performed in the name of science (including that of historic materialism) or profession, is based on senseless arrogance.

‘Co-motion’ means not only to move with the other but to move together. It means that the movement is not only in the head, but also in all our being. Co-motion has no space for intervention and does not allow one to become the object of intervention either. The idea is to act with the other, walking together down a road taken with prior accord.

On the other hand, the idea is to act in the simultaneous co-motion of ideologies and institutions. I was convinced of what Jean Robert77 once said - that it is time for us to stop running to the aid of Western orthodoxies decomposing in their countries of origin. Foucault78 also suggested that the idea

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77. Jean Robert, in conversation. See Jean Robert, Ecología y tecnología crítica, 1992, Distribuciones Fontanamara, Mexico
78. Foucault, M, 1992, Microfísica del poder, Ediciones de La Piqueta, Madrid
was no longer to change the consciousness of people, or what they have in their head, but rather the political, economic and institutional regime of the production of Truth (where Truth means not what is right or false, but rather those sentences we govern ourselves and others by).

To co-move is not to change or unleash a process of change, develop, raise consciousness, initiate an awakening, reform the State apparatus, to fight corruption, inefficiency or counter productiveness of institutions, etc. At the level of ideologies, we must renounce theory as well as generalizing and globalizing discourses, to reinvent language, speech, categories and truth production systems. At the institutional level, the idea is not to reform or combat them, but rather to dissolve them, which means to eliminate the ‘need’ for their existence, emanated from the artificial creation of scarcity, professionalism and institutional reduction of human needs and ways to satisfy them.

In terms of the Anglo-Saxon (colonialist) discourse, ‘decentralization’ means to transfer the centre to the periphery with the help of a set of norms which ensure efficiency and control. This also gave rise to the theories and practices of ‘community development’ and ‘popular participation’. Our efforts, in contrast, were to reconfigure the centre so as to dissolve it: to get support in multiple truth producing centres (reticular inter-connected cultural nuclei), whose functioning eliminates the need for a common centre.

This situation must not lead to a one-way street. Since it seems impossible to impulse real changes inside the State apparatuses (because of oversize, corruption, inefficiency, and so on) or without the State apparatuses (because of the resources they control, the extent of their affirmative or exclusive interventions and presence), it is necessary to act with them, tactfully celebrating real commitments within them inside defined tracks. The condition however is that the autonomy at the grassroots is affirmed, so as to advance in the necessary direction: that which implies the dismantling of the State apparatuses associated with the institutionalization and professionalization of the people’s needs and behaviours.

The idea is not to turn the State apparatuses into the hands of a popular or collective management, as conventionally proposed by the Left, because those apparatuses bear an alien and alienated pattern; the idea is to build other mechanisms that may advantageously substitute the State apparatuses, rendering the latter unnecessary. In this sense, the idea is to dismantle institutional and professional apparatuses that are counter-productive and onerous, apart from being instruments of domination, and replace them with instruments for action that are under the effective control of the people.

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Understanding the call for diversity
Learning from Literacy Campaigns: An Intercultural approach to Orality

Gustavo Esteva, Mexico

I would like to begin this note, with a fragment of a long essay I wrote in 2004 with Madhu S. Prakash and Dana Stuchul, entitled From Pedagogy for Liberation to Liberation From Pedagogy, for a book edited by Chet Bowers, dedicated to a radical critique of the life and work of Paulo Freire: Rethinking Freire: Globalization and the Environmental Crisis.

Resisting Awareness: The Case of Literacy

Like Marx, Freire professed a profound fascination for modern technology. Like Marx, he recognized that technology is not neutral and that it can be used as a tool for oppression. But like Marx, he seemed unable to discover the nature of technological society and to find in la technologie itself, as defined by Ellul80, a source of oppression and alienation.

Admittedly, Marx was a man of his time. For him, it was impossible to anticipate technological evolution and how completely tools would enslave, rather than liberate, tool-users. Freire, in contrast, separated himself from his times. While he conceived his work within the intellectual climate in which Jacques Ellul and Erich Fromm were revealing the nature of the technological society81, Freire was incapable of radically rejecting the progress flaunted by technological society. Critiques of Freire’s pre-ecological mindset legitimately focus on this incapacity. But in no other aspect is his silence or denial more evident than in the case of the alphabet: the tool of literacy.

It is to the alphabet, and to literacy, that Freire dedicated his life. Courageously, he denounced the deficiencies and perversions of the types of literacy promoted and imposed by the ‘banking’ system of education. From these critiques followed Freire’s proposed paths to liberation: the appropriation of the tool, its pedagogy and curricula, as well as the skills engendered by the oppressed themselves. He insisted on the importance of a ‘critical appropriation’ of literacy so that oppressors can no longer oppress the oppressed.

Here Freire confines himself to the critical question of who owns the tools and curricula of literacy, as well as their means and ends. He does not venture into how the tool itself tames people, reducing and confining them to the operations of the textual mind. Freire’s historical perspective does not extend itself to examine the social construction of the textual mind. Neither does he reflect upon the implications of the textual mind for the human condition, including social organization and its system of domination82.

In his denunciation of the discrimination suffered by the illiterate, Freire does not see, smell, imagine or perceive the differential reality of the oral world. While aspiring to eliminate all these forms of discrimination from the planet, he takes for granted, without more critical consideration, that reading and writing are fundamental basic needs for all humans. And, he embraces the implications of such assumptions: that the illiterate person is not a full human being.

79. This is an extract of the article, “An intercultural approach to orality” available on the NFE webpage of the UNESCO literacy portal.
81. During this period, Illich published Tools For Conviviality, 1973, and the Greens were emerging as a radical movement against the dominant paradigms of industrial society.
Freire’s pedagogic method requires that literacy should be rooted in the socio-political context of the illiterate. He is convinced that in, and through, such a process, they would acquire critical judgement about the society in which they suffer oppression. But he does not take into account any critical consideration of the oppressive and alienating character implicit in the tool itself, the alphabet. He cannot bring his reflection and practice to the point in which it is possible, as with many other modern tools, to establish clear limits to the alphabet in order to create the conditions for the oppressed to critically use the alphabet, instead of being used by it.

Though we are writing a text, we no longer wish to describe ourselves as ‘text people’. By this, we allude to a kind of man whose mind has been shaped and constructed as if it was a text. However the text, as an object different from a book, appeared simultaneously with the possessive individual and is its’ counterpart. It is clearly modern. Plato foresaw the problems inherent in the division between orality and literacy. He examined the transition from the always new act of remembering to the literate memory - to a condition dividing speech and thinking. With the emergence and dominance of text, a radically new kind of being is born.

As Plato suggested, the text is radically uprooted from any concrete, living experience, no matter how much it evokes living and concrete experiences, or is written or read in a very concrete and alive situation. The textual mind is constructed according to that model. In the same way that the liturgy of the Catholic church generated the faith and the reality of the community as a church, which is the object of such faith, the learning of texts, in the school, is the privileged place to generate the modern textual mind – radically uprooted and homeless.

The textual mind thinks of speech as frozen, of memories as things that can be saved and recovered, of secrets that can be engraved within the conscience and thus examined and of experiences that can be described. In writing texts, the modern individual ‘looks’ for the proper word to articulate what he wants to say. He thinks that he can store words related to what has happened – in his life, his job, his country – and mummify them, only to resurrect them later.

A text is in a sense past speech, but speech which has suffered a radical transformation, so radical that perhaps it can no longer be called speech. The alphabet allows us to register the speech and to conceive that record as a ‘language’ that we can use to speak and, in particular, to transmit to others the text we have in the mind. A textual man is someone who speaks trying to find the proper words in his mind, the text to shape his speech, his discourse.

To ‘communicate’ with others – a very modern urge – he tries to find not only the appropriate text, capable of capturing everything he wants to ‘communicate’, but also the best way to transmit that text, to imprint that text within the mind of another.

Text offers the material useful for constructing the present. Textual man continually constructs his present with the materials offered to him by his memory. Here, in memory, he is storing all the previous texts that he has learned ‘by memory’, as well as the texts into which he has transformed his experience.

Prior to the ascendancy of text, persons abided by their word. The transformation of man and society through text is illustrated by its etymology. Jurisdiction means the “administration of justice exercise of judicial authority, or of the functions of a judge or legal tribunal; power of declaring and administering law and justice; legal authority or power.” It is also “power or authority in general; administration, rule, control” or “a judicial organization; a judicature; a court, or series of courts, of justice83.”

The word ‘jurisdiction’ comes from the Latin ‘jurisdictio’. ‘Dictio’ is the action of dicere, to say, to declare. Jus-juris means law or rule. Used to establish the force of the word, the condition in which the word of a man was valued, accepted, or in which it ruled, the original meaning of the word, and its modern use, can only be fully grasped in the two different worlds in which they were used.

In the world of orality, where the oath is law, words are the fabric of human interaction. Modern men are men in context. The word context still describes the weaving of words, the connection

83. Oxford English Dictionary
between the parts of a discourse, the parts around a ‘text’ which determine its meaning. But it also means how men and woman are woven together, connected. They are connected through texts. Their minds are constructed in the shape of texts - uprooted, homeless texts. And they feel unbearable loneliness unless they find their contexts, to connect themselves to others through pertinent texts.

Thus, we no longer wish to describe ourselves as text people. Instead, we are bookish people: people who love to read books. Along with people at the grassroots level, we have learned to assume a critical distance from the alphabet. We now carefully avoid being reduced to a text. Even more, we seek not to reduce others to a textual frame of mind. We resist the modern maxim that liberation comes with literacy.

The modern mentality - whether that of Freire’s oppressor, or the oppressed – is inextricably shaped by the alphabet. Liberation cannot come from literacy – not even critical literacy, Freirean style. Liberation comes with the ability to assume a critical distance from the alphabet, from the recovery and regeneration of our minds, currently trapped and embedded within texts.

We recognize and celebrate that most people on earth are either functionally or absolutely illiterate: that is, non-alphabetized. Tragically, with each and every literacy campaign, their way of life and cosmovision are at risk of disappearing. Interest in the autonomy or liberation of the non-alphabetized by the literate must be accompanied by acknowledgement of the association between our texts and their oppression.

In August 2002, a few months before Ivan Illich passed away, we launched a reflection group to study his life and work. We agreed to meet once a week to reflect on his ideas, his conversations and some of his life stories. Our main intention was to relate these directly to our own experiences. We decided to explore in what ways his brilliant discourse reflected people’s own discourses, their ideas as much as their behaviours, in rural communities, in urban neighbourhoods and in dissident groups.

In this context, in February 2004, we lay our hands on a text A Plea for Research on Lay Literacy, written by Ivan in 1986.

“By ‘lay literacy’, I mean the symbolic fallout from the use of the alphabet in Western cultures – something quite different from clerical literacy, which consists of the ability to read and write. By ‘lay literacy’ I mean a distinct mode of perception in which the book becomes the decisive metaphor through which we conceive of the Self and its place. By lay literacy I do not mean the spread of written contents beyond the pale of clerics to others who, previously, could only listen to what is being read to them. I use the term lay literacy to speak of a mind-frame which is defined by a set of certainties which spread within the realm of the alphabet since late medieval times”. (Illich 1992, 159)

Why engage in such research? Illich offers the following reasons to commend the history of lay literacy to the attention of people who pursue research on, and not only in, education. The first is the level of concern within educational enterprise around universal clerical literacy as a goal to be reached before the year 200084. The other is the powerful temptation to replace the book, as the fundamental metaphor of self-perception, with the computer. (Illich 1992, 160).

Illich reveals that one of the main assumptions in all literacy campaigns [that there is a causal link between the individual’s writing skill and the new mind-frame he acquires] is largely false. Since the Middle Ages, the certainties that characterize the literate mind have spread, overwhelmingly, by means other than instruction in the skills of reading and writing. This is a point which must be kept in mind in the current discussions on illiteracy, semi-literacy and post-literacy. The approach currently used in spreading the skill of ‘written communication’ might actually be subversive to the literate mind. (Illich 1992, 160).

For Illich, research should explore the degree to which literates and illiterates alike share the special mind-set which arises in a society that uses alphabetic record. It would recognize that the literate mind constitutes a historical oddity of seventh century B.C. origin. It would further explore this space which is uniform in its characteristics, but diverse in all the distortions and transformations these permit. Finally, this research would recognize the heteronomy of the literate space in regard to three other domains: the worlds of orality, those shaped by non-alphabetic notations and, finally, that of the cybernetic mind. (Illich 1992, 191).

84. Now stretched to 2015
Illich clearly asserts that his world is that of literacy and that he is at home only on the island of the alphabet. But he feels threatened by the betrayal of those clerics who dissolve the words of the book into just another communication code. (Illich 1992, 181).

Before his unfortunate and premature death, Illich had already undertaken a large portion of the research he proposed in 1986. In 1988 he published, with Barry Sanders, *The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (North Point Press, San Francisco). This book gave shape to a series of discussions between Illich and Sanders, in Claremont and Mexico, after they had discovered a paradox – literacy is threatened as much by modern education, as by modern communication. Yet, as adverse as the side effects of compulsory literacy have been for most of our contemporaries, literacy is still the only bulwark against the dissolution of language into ‘information systems’. (Illich and Sanders 1988, ix).

In the following years, Illich wrote many essays addressing the same, parallel or connected themes. Some of them have been published. For example: *Guarding the Eye in the Age of Show and The Scopic Past and the Ethics of the Gaze: A Plea for the Historical Study of Ocular Perception*.

In 1993, he published what he considers his best book: *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh’s Didascalicon*. In his introduction, he writes:

> *This book commemorates the dawn of scholastic reading. It tells about the emergence of an approach to letters that George Steiner calls bookish, and which for eight hundred years legitimated the establishment of western scholastic institutions. Universal bookishness became the core of western secular religion, and schooling its church. Western social reality has now put aside faith in bookishness as it has put aside Christianity. Since the book has ceased to be the ultimate reason for their existence, educational institutions have proliferated. The screen, the medium, and ‘communication’ have surreptitiously replaced the page, letters, and reading. I here deal with the beginning of the epoch of bookishness which is now closing. I do so because this is the appropriate moment to cultivate a variety of approaches to the pages that have not been able to flourish under the monopoly of scholastic reading.* (Illich 1993, 1).

In order to answer to Ivan’s plea, we still thought that a systematic exploration of the concerns addressed in his research was necessary. In order to prepare this investigation, and to share our progress, we decided to gather once a week in a new working group attended by eight to twenty people of very different backgrounds and characteristics.

We decided to create four research groups that took up separately, four different mental spaces (or three, if we consider literates and illiterates to be part of the same, textual, culture, as is Illich’s hypothesis).

**The oral condition**: We are under the impression that the oral world has been seen and examined from the mental framework of the textual world – which implies not seeing it, reducing it to a perception that is incapable of perceiving its’ characteristics, its’ nature. Ivan implies in his texts that that world has disappeared, because of the degree to which illiterates (who would otherwise be of an oral mind) have been subordinated to, and immersed in, textual civilization.

Our hypothesis (which at face value seems more like mere conjecture or suspicion) is that the oral condition is still alive. In fact, at least one of the participants in the research group would OSTENSIBLY still be within it. We wish to explore the oral world in its own terms, and not in those of the textual world.

**The textual literate condition**: Starting with Illich’s hypothesis about the emergence of a mode of humankind whose metaphor is the book – what one would call a textual civilization – we will explore the characteristics of those who belong to it, seen from the position of those who already know how to read and write.

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86. Working Papers, No. 4 and No. 6, Science, Technology and Society Studies, 1994, 1995, University Park: Pennsylvania State University

87. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London
The textual illiterate condition: In Ivan’s hypothesis, the ‘lay’ condition, that of those who do not know how to read or write, has been exposed to the mode of being and thinking associated with the written word since the twelfth century. Illiterates thus belong to the same ‘world’ (or mental space) as the literate. We wish to explore the common and differential characteristics of these two groups, clearly distinguishing between total illiterates (those who have never learned how to read and write) and functional illiterates (those who acquired the ability to read and write and subsequently lost it to some degree).

The post-textual condition: Illich suspected that the textual civilization is being threatened as language increasingly becomes an information system. A new form of the human condition may be emerging, whose metaphor would be the computer screen. We wish to explore to what degree this is true...

We attempted an intercultural approach to the issues to facilitate the work of those coming from a mental framework different from that of the people or groups they were examining, and to articulate the relationship between the different research groups. This implied taking the exercise to the point where, beyond a dialectical exchange, we proceed to a dialogical dialogue, which transcends the logos of the dialoguing parts, without abandoning it (in the terms suggested by Raimon Panikkar and Robert Vachon).

Our explorations are not focused on literacy or literacy campaigns. We are attempting to discover, to reveal, the fundamental, radical heteronomy between the mental spaces of the four domains we are studying. We have not reached a point where we can come to any conclusions.

However, what we have explored until now has clear implications for literacy. Our research seems to confirm what has been described as the unwanted side effects of literacy programmes (for example in the work of our friend Majid Rahnema88). Today the impact looks even more damaging and can be seen in:

- The destruction of oral civilization, which has become a very endangered culture89. Its final extinction would imply a tragic loss.
- The conception and implementation of discriminatory literacy campaigns which disqualify for no legitimate reason both absolute and functional illiterates.
- Education in general, and literacy in particular, which subvert the literate mind in all its richness, as Illich warned, in the name of communication90.

At this point, after visiting and revisiting my search in this field, alone and with my friends, I want to say the following:

- Let’s celebrate the oral world

In the face of the persisting (and colonizing) pressure of the alphabet and the textual worlds, we need a wide public movement to celebrate the existence of oral worlds. We should celebrate the richness and value of the perceptions and conceptions held in the oral worlds. In them, we may find the inspiration to cope with contemporary difficulties.

- Let’s collect stories about the impact of literacy

The time has come to systematically collect and disseminate personal stories about the counter-productivity of literacy. What we need, in particular, are stories about how people have been able to

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88. Rahnema was a high officer in Iran and in the United Nations (particularly in UNESCO, where he was Member of its Executive Board, Secretary General of the World Conference on Illiteracy [1975], etc.). Since his retirement from active UN service, he has been extensively writing, lecturing and holding seminars on societal, transcultural and international issues. He has published many articles and at least one book on the question of literacy and its negative side effects.

89. Illich assumed that the oral man was virtually extinct, that in the course of the last eight centuries the domain of orality was replaced by lay literacy. Instead of the oral man, we would have the literate or illiterate textual man. We don’t know as yet. We are not sure. But we have a very strong suspicion that the oral man is still alive, and flourishing, and resisting the domination of the alphabet. Is it possible, as we begin to believe, to be an oral man who knows how to read and write but who has not been “alphabetized” (in Illich’s sense), because he has a critical distance from the alphabet?

90. For an historical and philosophical reflection on how communication is the opposite to culture, beyond McLuhan, see Gustavo Esteva, *Comunicación: contracultura*, in: *Comunicación y cultura*, 13, 1985.
heal from the damaging impact on their lives and from the mental frame it imposes. Some stories should describe the encounters between the literate people and the oral worlds.

- Let’s encourage the critical use of the alphabet

We need attitudes that allow us to use the alphabet (reading, writing, consulting books, etc.) without being used by it.

- Let’s prevent the emergence and domination of the ‘cybernetic man’

The civilization of the book (the human condition whose metaphor is the book) is now in danger. It can be displaced by a new social order organized around coded information. We need to systematically explore the nature of this threat and its’ possible consequences, as well as the way to protect both oral and textual worlds from their progressive encroaching by the ‘cybernetic man’. Perhaps many tools, used to teach how to read and write in literacy campaigns and schools, are dismantling the civilization of the book instead of widening its coverage as intended.

- Let’s stop literacy and education campaigns. Let’s say no to the goal of universal literacy and compulsory education.

I love to read. I am not against books. However, in my experience, all literacy and reading campaigns reinforce prejudices that discriminate against people living in oral societies, illiterates or people that don’t read. Reading and writing should not be considered a human right and a universal good. The skill of reading and writing should not be imposed as a requisite to live in society or to be a legitimate citizen. I am for freedom, particularly the freedom to learn. Those that want to learn how to read and write should be able to learn those skills in freedom.

We cannot present any of these reflections as recommendations. I am mentioning them here only to illustrate the kind of reflections emerging from our conversations and research.

References:

2) Esteva, G, 1985, Comunicación: contracultura, in: Comunicación y cultura, 13,
4) Illich, I, 1986, La alfabetización de la mentalidad: un llamamiento a investigarla, Cuernavaca: Tecnopolítica
5) Illich Ivan, 1987, Computer Literacy and the Cybernetic Dream,
6) Illich Ivan, 1990, Mnemosyne: The Mold of Memory: The Object of Objects: An Elegy for the Anchored Text, in In the Mirror of the Past 1992
Cultural regeneration, instead of education\textsuperscript{91}

Gustavo Esteva, Mexico

Indian peoples have been remembering an ancient Mayan tale in recent years: “They ripped off our fruit, they broke our branches, they burned our trunk, but they could not kill our roots”. In Unitierra, we turned this tale into the motto of a reflection-in-action exercise that we are currently carrying out with about 400 Indian communities in Chiapas, Guerrero and Oaxaca.

We have been reflecting together, and learning from one another, about the situation we find ourselves in so that we can conceive initiatives for cultural regeneration. Instead of making generalizations about the community and its’ culture, I would like to refer to this living exercise and what we have been discovering in it.

The tree is a myth. It appears in the most ancient traditions of almost all peoples. Its’ use as an analogy has turned out to be very effective for our exercise. The foliage represents the morphological aspects, the most visible dimension of a culture. The trunk represents its structural aspects, partly invisible. The roots symbolize the imaginary, that which is not said or thought about. The ancient tale thus takes on a precise meaning.

The analogy also allows an allusion to cultural grafts. In a tree, the graft will prosper if it is well done and is of the same species. The same happens in culture. Something like the plough, which came from abroad, has become a characteristically local object and now constitutes a differentiated cultural expression of our peoples.

In clear contrast, we can also use the analogy to allude to incrustations, foreign cultural elements that cannot be grafted. Some can function as ornaments, as support or enrichment. Others are destructive parasites that consume the cultural tree and can kill it, as in any living tree.

In the course of this exercise, participants in each community dress up their own cultural tree: imagining its’ foliage, retracing its’ trunk, re-living and expressing life stories, metaphors and analogies. These latter elements constitute the roots and cannot be stated or thought.

I want to share here what community members have been sharing in their own words\textsuperscript{92}.

Remembering

We have been remembering. Remembering is necessary for us to regenerate ourselves – not in order to hate, but to recuperate the harmony that we lost with the Conquest and that we have continued to lose because the inheritors of the Spanish legacy continue to impose foreign things on our peoples.

We cannot return to what we once had and it is not necessary to return either. But we have to express our feelings for the past, to obey that which we have inside.

And after talking with our grandfathers (abuelos), we have started to look anew at our surroundings. We begin to pay closer attention to what we have been ignoring in our everyday lives.

\textsuperscript{91} Excerpted from the article “The communal freedom to learn” available on the NFE webpage of the UNESCO literacy portal

\textsuperscript{92} I cannot associate each phrase with the person who said it because they were stated during open conversations, which could not be interrupted to verify each person’s name. I base the following on the transcriptions of the recordings of those conversations, slightly edited for the written version.
Retelling the damage done

For some of us who participate in this regeneration effort, what we have seen is terrible. Those of us who are closer to the cities are more and more confused. We can’t even talk anymore. In many communities language is disappearing. Only the elders preserve it now.

It is sad to see ourselves invaded by junk food, things that are not nourishing. And what’s worse, is that they look down on what our food. Some don’t even want it anymore and only buy what comes from the outside. They are addicted. There are those who can no longer eat without having their soft drink, and they snub our own fresh fruit juices.

What we know is looked down upon. Our parents and grandparents can teach us what they know - not only do they know how to cultivate land, how to build and repair the home, how to cure an illness, how to feel better. They also know what it is to live, how to regain harmony, how to face difficulties. But many people have been casting them aside.

Sometimes what comes from the outside confuses us because we’re not ready for it. Our culture is fragmenting. The communities closest to the cities are the most affected. Those who’ve gone to school have lost their culture. The foreign bombardment beats our mind, our hope...

It is true that school has become an obsession, as if everything that one does not know, could be learned there. People think that those who come from outside the communities are the ones who know and that the graduates from high school, college or university are the ones who can tell us where to walk and how to solve our problems... Some come to believe that good knowledge is only to be found in books. That those who cannot read are ignorant fools...

School is drying up our roots. Children don’t respect their elders anymore, they don’t know their culture. School alienates children from their own culture and discriminates them. It fosters competition and individualism. Foreign history is taught to us, but none concerning the community itself.

When people get sick they run to the doctor or to the health centre. Often we have no healers left and we don’t pay heed to home remedies. The slightest pain or fever is reason for people to pop the pill. They have traded our healers and midwives for doctors, although we’re getting sick increasingly more often now.

We have observed that there are some who don’t want to engage in voluntary community service (tequio) anymore. Some don’t show up at assemblies. They are too busy with their lives and prefer leaving each one to his own problems. Others barely make enough to survive and have no time for other things. If something goes wrong they complain about authorities, but do nothing to remedy it. Or worse still, they join the [political] parties and think that that’s the way to bring about change.

In some communities, people want to be in positions representing authority for the financial gains but not for serving the community.

Political parties break up people and community. They defend selfish interests and not the interest of communities. They are undermining our culture and create vices. They monopolize power, so that real authority is lost. The rules for living together harmoniously and the obligation to serve the community are broken. Maturity is lost. It is an incrustation that we cannot manage.

And what if those on the outside are right? Some say that by being rooted in what’s ours, in our traditions, we cannot ‘progress’ Isn’t that the reason why we’re ‘poor’? Wouldn’t it be better to give up and begin to walk a new road and see how it goes? Why not be ‘modern’ Why not enter the game they call ‘development’ once and for all?

It’s true, some of us get confused. But the sadness and anxiety act as a warning. We have become better aware of what is happening, of what we need to do. And finally we see what we still have.

Our languages

There is strength in our languages. They are not only a way of communicating between ourselves in the intimacy of the home, the family, the community. In them we also discover ways of thinking that are ours. There are things we cannot really say in Spanish.
Following their trail we can discover an entire world of philosophical conceptions that are ours, of ways of living and understanding the world, conceptions that are wiser and more sensible than the ones that they have tried to impose on us. The same happens with Spanish which has words that cannot be translated into our languages. Those help us see with clarity what they are trying to incrust.

There are some who are obsessed with writing in our languages. They think that good Zapotec or Mixtec ‘literature’, or of any of our other peoples, is a must to be on par with the Westerners. There’s nothing wrong in doing so, for their own enjoyment. But they fail to notice the vitality and creativity that come from oral cultures such as ours, those that haven’t given in to the text. The text freezes, renders cold. It can paralyze and kill.

When we surrender to writing, we also surrender to what comes from above and from the outside. To maintain the strength of oral culture is to maintain autonomy. It’s okay to learn Spanish and to read, in order to understand and be understood by those who speak that language and to attend to matters outside the community. That also helps us to learn from others, from what is written. But we must always continue to cultivate our own language well and consolidate who we are.

Savouring our own food

Perhaps we need to better appreciate what the señoras make. They invent dishes by combining everything we have in different ways. There are many who always stick to the same recipes, repeating them day after day. That’s fine. How can we cast aside the tortilla come freshly off the comal? We must recover certain customs. Take for instance the pigweeds, which are different in every milpa and in each community, with which many savoury dishes can be prepared. Not everyone knows how to prepare their pumpkin flowers or make good, varied stews, with more than one hundred species of pigweeds. There are some who can’t even prepare and eat the huitlacoche [corn mushroom] anymore. And to think that it is now sold expensively in some restaurants!

Economic hardship makes us return to our fruit juices, to our own beverages, which can be drunk in varied ways and at every occasion. The tejate, the champurrado and our chocolate are still alive... So are our tepaches, our cured drinks, our aguardientes, and of course our mezcales, which despite commercialization continue be a local craft in many places...

Food is still at the centre of our life. We will not let it leave that place. We must do something to regenerate it, from cultivation to all the ways of preparing it, cooking it and eating it. We must also revive the custom of eating together in the family so that our words make it more savoury!

Dwelling

We are still dwellers. We still own the art of building our homes. And that home doesn’t only include the family house, its’ plot, its’ land for cultivating, but also streets, plazas, places for playing, to come together, to enjoy our festivities...

Few things have been as affected as our ways of living. Even in the most remote communities, developers have arrived to impose their ways, making our villages ugly. Everywhere we look, we find construction rods sticking out of roofs, in the hope of a second storey that never appears. The concrete tiles used make us leave our houses during the hot season. The metal sheet roofs prevent any kind of conversation during the rainy season... The harmony and style of our buildings is lost, creating combinations that look ugly.

During the 1985 earthquake which destroyed many houses in Oaxaca and Guerrero, we were able to see clearly what they had done to us. Many adobe houses resisted. These were old ones that withstood this not only this earthquake but many others before. It was those that had cement in the corners meant to reinforce them that actually fell.

The majority of our houses and buildings have been built by the families and communities, by us. In many places the use of our own materials still predominates, although in others they are disappearing.

The task of regeneration will be very difficult here, not because we don’t know how to do it anymore, but because of the way in which what’s ours has been disqualified. People say: ‘I want a good
house made of material [industrial construction material], without realizing he’s sacrificing his good sense for an illusion. The idea that a better way of life is only attainable using modern materials and styles has penetrated our mindsets very deeply.

What is needed, above all, is that we really compare the quality of materials, that we learn to enjoy once again the beauty of our own inventions, adapted to the characteristics of each place, its’ climate, its’ people. And then we can look for grafts from other places that could enrich our ways without ruining them.

As we regenerate our art of dwelling, we will think better about what to do with our clothing, our footwear, our personal adornments, our daily customs, our places for playing or strolling or getting together, our public buildings...

Reviving our way of dwelling will also mean regenerating our way of living. We have to regenerate the way we relate to Mother Earth, who we’ve been hurting so much. Whether we’ll be able to care for her will depend on how we can live, on how we will know to take from her what we need and give back what belongs to her. Depending on how we organize to work and produce, as people, in family or by creating groups, we will be able to have a dignified and autonomous life.

Entretejernos (Intertwining ourselves)93

Yes, it is true, individualism has spread among us and people don’t participate as much as they did before. But our capacity for being together is still strong, our autonomy for handling our own affairs, the way in which we build authority so that it dedicates itself to serving, not to serving itself.

The strength of the assembly is maintained, as the supreme authority, even if everyone does not attend and though we are sometimes in conflict. We can still lean on it to strengthen the communal spirit, to trace our own path and walk it.

Even in places where the collective capacity to do things has almost been lost, our festivities retain their vitality. It is the moment in which we all get together, settle some of our quarrels and celebrate who we are. Even those who have emigrated, spending many years away, return to accompany us. If they can’t come, at least they send something to contribute.

In our fiestas, perhaps more than in anything else, we can express ourselves in our communal being, in ‘comunalidad’. Here, there is no competition, but rather a wish to contribute. The mayordomos, who spend even what they don’t have, feel the desire to please the community, to demonstrate their commitment to her, rather than to show off or boast.

Fiestas are part of the essence of the community. People come without having to be invited. There is no need to convocate them. Transcendental issues for the community are discussed at the fiestas. It is a space of trust and of exchange among people of the community, where important decisions are made or people’s opinion is sounded.

Many factors are militating against our autonomous ways, in which all of us who are we94 – even those who aren’t there – interweave ourselves. But it’s not easy to regenerate this, because the dissolving agents are already inside. Many people are already infected by the virus of individualism and they undermine us with their behaviour, with their envies and their abandonment.

Nurturing our roots

The root is what we know without having to ask anyone, and without anyone having taught it to us.

Even if one thinks sometimes that the contact with the roots has been severed, they’re still there.

Matters related to our roots are understood with the heart, even if other things are thought of with the head.

93. Entretejernos is another difficult word to translate. It literally means: to interweave or intertwine ourselves (with each other). It connotes a way of cultivating interdependence, of strengthening the ways of being in community, of being community.

94. “...en que nos entretejemos todos los que somos...”; i.e. in which all of us who make up who we are collectively – that we who we are – interweave ourselves with each other (see previous footnote).
If we wish to define our roots, to explain them, to rationalise them in formal terms, we begin to betray them, to dissolve them. As we’ve said throughout this reflection, the roots are like the light which illuminates everything for us but which we can’t see. They are what allow us to speak, what gives meaning to our words, but we can’t speak it...

They’re there, our roots, alive and strong. They’re not the same as they were a thousand or a hundred years ago. Or even last year for that matter. Precisely because they are alive they change, they enrich themselves, they transform. Sometimes they go very far, to look for the water that nourishes them. Sometimes they get tangled up in one place. But they remain themselves, our roots. Because we are that, even before we know who we are...

What to do?

We already have an account of the damage, of what has harmed us and continues to affect us in every aspect of our reality. Should we first remedy that which is most damaged? Attend to it and cure it?

We also know what we still have, in spite of it all. What is clean (propio)? What is ours? Would it not be better to dedicate ourselves to expanding it, to strengthening it, to taking advantage of its’ strength and vigour?

Or perhaps we should attempt something that manages both things at the same time: find something that remedies what is damaged and expands what is ours...

To conceive of the regeneration work that we are going to carry out, we first and foremost need to rid ourselves of the habit of taking on projects that have been brought to us by emissaries, from government, from institutions and from non-governmental foundations and organizations. They all work with projects based on their conceptions, their norms, their decisions, their programmes. Since they come here offering resources and support, and since we are always in need, we frequently fall into that trap. Instead of thinking of what we really need, of what the community requires, we enter into the project framework just to see what we will get.

The situation is quite similar to a child being brought to a shop window to choose his candy or toy. He isn’t thinking of what he most wants, what he would most like, but simply chooses among what’s been placed in front of him. That’s how the government and non governmental organizations approach us, with their shop of things and services that they can give. And we start choosing among what there is, without thinking much about what we really need and still less about the price that we must pay for accepting that support, that project. This price can be very high in terms of dignity, autonomy and freedom...

For an authentic exercise in regeneration, the worst that we can do is to ask ourselves what there is (in the market of the government or civil organizations) and demand for it. Even if we were to get them to give us what we’d asked for, we would probably be contributing to the degeneration of the communities, not to their regeneration.

When an idea begins to shape, we must feel it out, have it circulate inside the community and see what happens to it.

One day we will wake up with the sensation that the idea has taken on its full form and that it is the moment to turn it into an initiative. In that moment the most important thing is to start looking for what is needed to carry it out, for what we have in the community already to make it happen.

Is there clarity about the idea? Can everyone understand it and feel motivated to participate in it? Or will we need to share its’ foundations, its’ origin, the way in which it came to us, in order that it might come to others as well?

Are there people in the community who can take the initiative in their hands? Do they have the saberes95 that is needed? Will they have the time and desire to do it?

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95. Saberes, plural of saber. The Spanish distinction between saber and conocimiento is lost in translation. Both are commonly translated as ‘knowledge’, though the former is etymologically linked to two other words that shed light on its meaning and connotations: sabor (taste) and sabiduría (wisdom). Saberes, therefore, are ‘wise ways’ that come from long experience, from direct contact with the world and from the lessons of those who came before. You sabes when you learn from the world; you conoces when you learn about the world.
There are many questions we must ask ourselves about the initiative, so that it starts ripening. Once we have all of the answers, asking those who know, we can clearly establish whether the initiative can be carried out through the autonomous impulse of the community. (These are the best initiatives). If it is so, the time has arrived to present it in public in a manner that can be agreed with the authorities. We need to prepare for that moment very carefully so that the community will approve it.

**On the question of the ‘intercultural’**

The above is a more or less arbitrary selection of what I have been hearing in the communities we are working with. I believe that commitment to regeneration is affirmed everyday, not only in these, but in thousands of indigenous communities.

What those communities are saying and doing supposes a culturally-specific perspective that could be summarized in the following terms:

“The earth is our mother, which nurtures, cares for and gives us life. As a mother, she cannot be bought, sold, or converted into the property of anyone. As a mother, we must respect and care for her. Just as our parents place us in direct relation with all of our ancestors, the earth symbolizes that which unites us with the universe, with the cosmos, with plants, animals, rivers, mountains, with all beings living and dead, with all reality.

At the same time, the earth gives us a place in the world – a place that belongs to us and to which we belong. This bond of belonging does not imply possession or property, but defines and establishes a way of relating that imposes obligations, ties, and unions. Because it is ours as the sphere of the community, because it is left to us by our ancestors, because it is delimited by a web of relationships of mutual respect with our neighbours, we are able to carry out our life there, but have to make a great effort to care for it and protect it for the generations that will succeed us.

The earth and the place establish our condition as people – knit in webs of relationships – whose social and existential fabric is a sphere of community. That sphere of community is articulated by comunidalidad – the condition of existing in community – which establishes the mutual obligations of those of us who form the community.

**Comunalidad** has as its primary substance ‘harmony’. In order to care for and maintain harmony, and to assure the lastyness of the community, we act in accordance with the rules, principles, norms, formulated over time by our ancestors, a reflection of experience of *convivir* (living together), which are given to us from the moment we are born and which we learn as children (Ontonomy6). These norms can be modified by us, as a community, using the procedures established within each one in order to adjust to changing circumstances (Autonomy). In certain aspects of our life, especially when we leave our communities, we are forced to adjust ourselves to norms imposed by others (Heteronomy).

To coordinate our collective commitments and maintain the vitality of the community, we fulfill cargos which begin in our youth: services that are given voluntarily to the community. (They are a fundamental obligation for belonging in the community, but they are voluntarily fulfilled. The same norms establish the actions to be taken when someone does not fulfill these obligations). Cargos are hierarchical: one advances little by little, based on the responsibility demonstrated in service to the community. But the hierarchy does not imply power or command over the rest. The authoriy of a group, an organization or the community as a whole has powers delegated by its members, limited and guarded by them, and they can only be exercised when following the will of all: the authority commands by obeying.

Our ‘saber’ is the fruit of the experience accumulated in the community and in personal life. It is embodied in that experience. We complement it with different kinds of learning, which include abstract knowledge transmitted directly, or by way of books, which we can employ to shed some light on what

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96. This word was coined by Robert Vachon to describe the process of cultural transmission: the rules and statements through which we govern ourselves and others are learned in the community, in the daily life, within a specific cultural atmosphere. He writes: “Ontonomie: L’ordre (nomos) de l’être (ontos); il existe une interconnection, harmonie et polarité interne au reel qui n’est pas celle, externe, du soi (auto) dans ‘autonomie’ ou d’un autre (hetero) dans ‘heteronomie’. Se dit d’un ordre intérieurement inscrit dans l’être”. See Autogestion et développement: La tradition autochtone contemporaine d’autogestion et de solidarité cosmique, 1983, Recherches Amerindiennes au Québec, Vol. XIII, No.1.
happens in reality, but which we do not confuse with what connects us through experience, not through that abstract knowledge or its categories.

We are what we are, a ‘we’ particular to each community, that we know is distinct from other ‘we’s’. With some other communities we have clear spheres of communion – for example those with who we share a common tongue, a shared tradition or history, a vicinity. With other people or groups we also hold shared ideas or attitudes that allow us to form accords or coalitions for specific purposes. But we know we are different, unique, singular, and we want to continue to be that way."

More and more, communities find themselves in a multicultural environment that imposes challenges that they are clearly conscious of. How can they deal with them?

There is no supra-cultural criteria, existing in an impartial or neutral place, that could be used to examine, compare and judge different cultures. We rely on our culturally entrenched language, our concepts, values and perspectives. We cannot establish any hierarchy among cultures, or apply the values of one to the others. Each person can however, from the standpoint of his or her own culture, appreciate or look down on others – as long as he recognizes that he is applying his own criteria and perceptions to something entirely different.

We can identify some common elements of human life: we all breathe, think, feel or prefer some things over others. In that way we distinguish ourselves from other species. But each culture perceives these things in a different and distinctive manner and thereby differentially shapes those human qualities. There are no cultural universals (Panikkar 1993).

All cultures have their values, but they cannot be made absolute or universal: they cannot be applied to everyone. This does not imply relativism, but rather relativity: each Cosmo vision, each affirmation, each notion, is relative to its’ context. No culture embraces the totality of human experience.

An intercultural situation is produced when people or groups from distinct cultures enter into a relationship. When one group imposes itself on another, by force or by persuasion as in the colonial condition, it can arouse resistance in the colonized: a form of isolation, of withdrawal into its’ own culture. Or it might generate ‘transculturation’ or ‘acculturation’, as a survival reaction where one abandons one’s own culture to “transfer oneself” into the dominant culture, to settle into it.

Often a combination of these two reactions also appears. Groups resist but at the same time assume degrees, and forms, of assimilation and absorption. In this way, a culture can enrich itself by changing traditions in a traditional way, giving historical continuity to a culture, rendering possible change and dynamism, not dissolution.

I call ‘intercultural’ a condition that assumes a different attitude to those I have just mentioned, in which one culture does not impose itself on the other. As I understand it, ‘intercultural’ alludes to a dynamic situation wherein there is a consciousness that other people, values and cultures, exist and that isolation is impossible. This awareness implies acknowledgement of the limitations of every culture and an understanding of all that is human. Instead of taking refuge in one’s own culture – trying to isolate oneself, taking distance from the other or suppressing it - one is inspired to interact with the other recognizing its’ radical otherness.

Today as never before, we are forced to adopt a position in relation to the presence of the other. It has become impossible to avoid mutual interaction, interdependence, interference: the world is throwing us all into the arms of the other. And there, in that novel situation from which it is now impossible to escape, we suffer the incompatibility of different Cosmo visions, just as many of our ancestors did.

I do not refer to situations in which different opinions, points of view, or attitudes interact. In these situations a democratic procedure can be applied, offering a consolation prize to those who find themselves in the minority. The minorities carry the hope of changing their statute at the next chance. Democracy is not irrelevant and is certainly better than fighting. But democratic procedure does not resolve the confrontation between different Cosmo visions. Contact or conflict between cultures cannot be resolved with the victory of one side, even if provisional or transitory. We are inevitably presented with the question of pluralism.

Based on the assumption that reality itself is plural, the pluralist conflict cannot be managed merely within the democratic process. Faced with the plurality of reality, which is causing confrontations on
an unprecedented scale, only a pluralist stance is suitable. Today, it is imperative that we open up to
dialogue between cultures.

The dialogue between cultures must be a dialogical dialogue, transcending the planes of the logos
of each of the interacting cultures, their conceptual systems, their reasons and values. It implies open-
ing up to the concerns of the other, to guidance, suspicions, inspiration, ideals or any element that both
parties can share and neither of them controls. It is art as much as knowledge, praxis, gnosis and theory.
We have to try it, to make it real, even when one of the parties resists doing it.

The eagerness today to impose the first truly global empire in history, a strictly monocultural empire,
makes it imperative to put to test the option of the ‘intercultural dialogue’. From the recognition of the
radical otherness of the other, it is necessary to consider with utmost seriousness and rigor the creation
of a world in which many worlds can be embraced, and in which all of them can coexist in harmony.

**Intercultural education?**

In the cultural regeneration exercise mentioned above, when we come to the point of talking about
harmful cultural incrustations, those that the communities cannot control despite their negative impact,
the first one that comes up for discussion is indeed ‘school’ and ‘education’.

Communities mention school and education even more than television, highways, development
projects or even violence. Why? Simply because school is the perfect example of a process refusing
any authentic dialogue. Schools and education continue to be a legal and bureaucratic imposition on
the people.

We have to take up the matter rigorously but serenely, especially now that the phenomenon of
bicultural or intercultural education has begun to spread.

To learn and to bestow social recognition on those who ‘know’ appears to be a historical constant
in almost all cultures. Learning is a human quality. "**Birds fly, fish swim, human beings learn**, says

Learning is an expression of the human condition. We learn from the day we are born until the day
we die. But we must not see that activity as a cultural universal. Each culture has its’ own ways of learn-
ing and recognizing those who ‘know’. They have a diversity of theories and practices about learning
that cannot be reduced to education, and much less to school. These are the tools of only one culture:
the dominant one.

What we have mistakenly called the ‘westernization’ of the world does not imply that all peoples
and cultures have become ‘western’ and that they have ceased to be what they are, although there are
an increasing number of ‘westernized’ people. The social majorities of the world continue to belong to
other cultures: they are still immersed in their own horizons of intelligibility.

Education has socially defined itself as a need and a right. In every country today there are mecha-
nisms of persuasion and of legal, social, and physical coercion in order to impose education. Moreover,
within every culture supporters of education have contributed from the inside to incorporate this tool into
the said culture, first subjecting it and then dissolving it.

To propose the idea of bicultural or intercultural education is, therefore, a contradiction in terms. In re-
ality, it is a euphemism to hide what we really do with that device: dissolving other, ‘subordinate’ cultures.

In Mexico, the colonialist character of the education system took shape in the nineteenth century.
Back then, the first Constitution proclaimed by our founding fathers was said to follow, step by step, "**the
example of the happy Republic of the United States of America**". The founding fathers also decided
to imitate the United States with regards to the Indian peoples, in effect by finding ways to exterminate
them. But in our case the Indians were too many and our liberals, moreover, were too enlightened: they
could not consider genocide. Consequently, they proposed a culturicide: to educate the Indians... in
order to transform them into ‘regular’ Mexicans.

This endeavour persisted throughout the twentieth century. As in all other aspects of domination, it
faced the resistance of the Indian peoples. When President Cárdenas decided to defeat this resistance,
he fenced the schools in with the complicity of some parents, backed up by military and police so that children would not escape.

Due to government insufficiency or incapacity, and continued resistance, education has not been given to all. But it partly fulfils its function. It is able to take some people out of their culture, shape them in the dominant one, subordinate them to it, and at the same time disqualify everyone else.

The main explicit objective of education and the purpose that legitimizes it, is the concern for equality. It is maintained that a more egalitarian society will be created as a result, that everyone will have access to the same opportunities. The reality nevertheless is that the main outcome of education is the massive production of dropouts and their consequent social isolation.

It creates two classes of people: knowledge capitalists and the destitute. Several studies have shown that a majority of children currently entering the first grade of school are never able to reach the level considered obligatory in their countries. The phenomenon is not only observed in societies like ours. It also appears in the richest ones.97 Education can be legitimately described as a device for cultural dissolution, for the destruction of cultures. During the last few years, as Indian peoples transform their resistance effort into a fight for liberation, they have placed education at the centre of their concerns. The Indigenous State Forum of Oaxaca clearly expressed this in a plenary resolution. As an expression of an increasingly generalized conviction, efforts are concentrated on regenerating culturally-rooted forms of learning and social recognition, while at the same time, practicing forms of dialogical dialogue with the dominant culture and with others. In those new efforts, there is overall awareness that education is a historical fact. It had a beginning and it can have an end. We find ourselves, perhaps, at the beginning of its’ end, which will undoubtedly occur when we will have finally created a world in which many worlds can fit.

References:

2) Panikkar, R, 1993, La diversidad como presupuesto de la armonía entre los pueblos, Wiñay Marca, Barcelona, no.20.

97. Jonathan Kozol became famous with a book in which he described life in an elementary school in the United States. He called it Death at an Early Age. A few years ago he published the results of his examination of the American school system. His new book was entitled, Savage Inequalities.
Despite its known achievements in modernising education, which have transformed the country into one of the ‘knowledge capitals’ of the world, India continues to remain a fertile ground for educational theories and learning experiments that vehemently resist unwholesome Western education trends and their homogenizing and flattening impacts.

Many of these ‘alternative’ institutions and learning centres assist learners in acquiring knowledge for life through the mother tongue or vernacular language which, invariably, is never English. It is important that we look at the serious efforts of ‘vernacular educators’ if we have any desire to examine those visions that are resolutely contrary to the increasingly corporate-controlled, and corporate-dominated, world of modern education and schooling.

As a long-standing civilization, India has benefitted from a group of fairly impressive educational thinkers and political leaders of the likes of Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, Vinobha Bhave and Jiddu Krishnamurti. Some, like Gandhi, Tagore and Krishnamurti, are known worldwide and are read by all those who seriously desire a wholesome method of raising their young. This is not only separate and distinct from Western perceptions, but deals with aspects of the spirit and its concerns as well.

Their writings comprise a complete and actionable system of learning principles, which is so self-contained that teachers are not in need of reading or studying corresponding texts or pedagogies from Western sources. More important, these writings have inspired an entire generation of vernacular educators who took what they had to say quite seriously, and went on an innovation spree that transformed the business and purposes of learning for life.

I propose in this brief essay to pit some of the concerns of these extraordinarily diverse individuals against the dominant trends of a globalizing world economy – an economy that unilaterally seeks to impose corporate values on what we call education. Globalization is exerting a downward pressure on educators that is considerably distorting the way people think about learning across the planet.

With the assistance of a small grant from UNESCO, we identified a group of more than twenty vernacular educators having decided they would no longer associate themselves with ‘factory schooling’ or the system introduced by erstwhile colonial regimes. Instead, they would channel their energies into creating learning environments to meet learning demands far more successfully, however efficient conventional education institutions might claim to be.

We discussed, visited and surveyed the work of several of these vernacular educators located in different regions of India. They included Aksharnandan in Pune (western India); Kanavu in Wynad, Kerala; Vikasana in Bangalore; Vidyodaya in the Nilgiris (Tamilnadu); Sumavanam in Mandanapalli in Andhra Pradesh; the Sita School in Bangalore; Srujan Anand in Kolhapur (Maharashtra); Puttani Makkala Shala in Dharwad, Karnataka and Sarang, Palakkad, Kerala.

Most of these educators were convinced that vernacular learning not only protects young people from the dreadful prospect of homogeneity, but it makes them more capable of understanding and coping with the problems raised by globalization. They are also better off in terms of being able to confidently create their own employment niches, in comparison to conventional college and university
graduates who are seen as fairly useless to employers (the knowledge of graduates is book-based and they often have little or no practical experience due to their isolation in educational institutions for fifteen years or so).

In fact, many of these vernacular educators ventured into a different kind of schooling after having had personal, direct, sometimes brutal, experience of conventional schools and their deadening impact on creativity, learning and the natural state of happiness in which children can normally find themselves. Therefore, when they set up their own learning centres, they consciously designed these with features that one finds absent in most conventional schools.

All of them flourished by working with the local language or the child’s mother tongue, keeping English at bay at least until the person had a fairly good grounding in his or her own language. As Vidya Patwardhan of Aksharnandan related to us, not only is the mother tongue the most natural tool for the child’s initiation into learning, it converts the home into an extension of learning space.

Learning in the mother tongue is also the best means of becoming acquainted with one’s culture. The child has access to local literature and, through it, to the flavour of the region, the history of its’ people, their customs, etc. This understanding later expands naturally to one’s country, its history, struggles and provides the basis for a strong sense of belonging and identity.

So in using one’s own language, one is building a bridge to one’s culture, one’s people and one’s own self. Every language has its own beauty and functions as a window to a particular culture. No language is to be considered superior to another.

Another feature of the alternative schools that we discovered was the richness of their agendas. We found that none of them was structured like a conventional school, where a teacher in a building with a blackboard lectures to a mass of children who have been ‘disciplined’ into silence, and the majority of whom are unable to comprehend the things that are going on around them.

Indian alternative schools remain largely free environments, where children are not classified under age-groups, but often according to ability. Some simply refuse to use textbooks. None use examinations for assessment or evaluations. Almost all had turned the learning place into a hotbed of activities from cooking to theatre. The schooling environment had become an exciting place for the children who found they could dream, work, sing, listen to stories, draw and paint to their heart’s content, without the overhanging pressures of a syllabus to be completed.

At Aksharnandan, for example, while one group of students would be involved in a recording session, another group would be busy putting up a display of printing achieved with vegetables dyes. A third group would be practising circus tricks, while a fourth would be cooking the vegetables they had grown earlier in the school garden, using vermicompost generated from school trash. Some of the seniors would have gone to the town for a survey. Visits to learning places outside the school was actually a routine part of the curriculum.

At the Puttani Makkala Shale, Rajani and Prakash Garud replaced the text-based syllabus with theatre. Their school had no uniforms or shoes. Communication was in the mother-tongue and preferably outdoors rather than in confined areas. Theatre included puppetry, drama, music, song, story-telling, costume-making. Teachers were now maushis (aunts) or mamas (uncles), the basic idea in the change of nomenclature being to eliminate all sources of fear and alienation from the child.

“*Theatre*, Garud told us, *questions everything. It is a rebellious medium and a rebellious way of education. It always questions the system. It deals with both body and mind. It questions everything. In fact, good art questions everything.*”

Garud said she was not convinced about syllabus, methodology, curriculum and all the other structured and organized ways in which teaching and learning activities had mired themselves. Ideally learning should not require any or all of these paraphernalia. What a change from the conventional education system in which millions of children across the globe are made to cram texts and information, prepared for them by bureaucrats and government servants calling themselves teachers!

At Kanavu, K J Baby and Shirley George created a school for the children of the Wynad tribals, hitherto living at the edges of Kerala society. In Kanavu, the main tools of learning are the sense organs:
the children begin with a bath in the river early in the morning, followed by yoga, kallari (martial arts) and meditation. If they are so inclined, they study academic subjects like science, or history, while other children do needle work, cooking or farming.

History is strictly the history of the Wynad tribes. The children learn their myths and stories and visit festivals and places that are part of their culture. One of the aims of the programme is to create self-respect among the tribal students for their language, culture and status. Above all they develop their music skills, sing and dance with verve, and have created a musical group that travels far and wide and earns income for their school.

Studying the environment is an integral part of the learning process. Being involved in vegetable and rice farming, they learn first-hand about the interconnectedness of their life with the soil. Kanavu has its’ own fields and rubber estate where children learn to tap latex. They walk the forests regularly with their teacher, learning directly from the Book of Nature. Nature, in fact, is the syllabus.

At M C Malati’s Vikasana school, the stress is on livelihood skills. Besides academic skills, the children are involved in pottery, carpentry, sewing, drawing and painting, origami, music, sports, caring for nature. They paint murals on the school walls, sew bags and clothes for themselves, repair buildings, make tables and shelves for their classrooms or toys to give away.

At Jane Sahi’s Sita school, children become competent in language, practical maths, clay work, tailoring, printing, first aid, home remedies, kitchen gardening, theatre and art. Narasimhan, from Sumavanam, says in this context: “Children love stories, singing and play and certain concepts can easily be grasped by them through these media. Children love working with their hands and have abundant energy. Introducing them to handicrafts can satiate this energy and also help concentration and quietness of mind.”

These schools consciously inculcate positive human values: cooperation rather than competition, a love for learning, fearlessness and belief in oneself and one’s abilities. They emphasize experience, not textbook learning, and nurture a spirit of excellence in the broad sense, including caring and responsible attitudes and a constructive or non-violent use of one’s faculties.

What a contrast this is to all that modern education stands for! What a splendid critique of it as well! Here we have fine examples of learning in freedom and education for life. Yet the agenda of modern education continues to remain unchanged! Despite all the King’s horses and all the King’s men, modern educators simply fail to respond creatively or satisfactorily to the intensity of the desire to learn in the young, something that these vernacular schools have achieved with remarkable ease.

Modern schooling still boxes children into hideous buildings looking remarkably like factories. Teachers continue to drone, repeating the same sterile bits of information they deign to call ‘knowledge’ year after year. Children continue to remain subjected to the terror and anxiety of examinations.

And what are the best educational methods available today and what do they seek to achieve? If they are examined carefully, we see that they are analogous to the work of blacksmiths: roast your metal in hot fire, then hammer and hammer way, to get it to the shape and personality you want. A successful product is one that fits as smoothly as an unthinking cog into the global production ‘megamachine’. We get a steady stream of these cogs through so-called ‘quality education’!

The formal education system, represented in millions of schools and similar institutions all over the planet, has therefore become the single biggest catchment from which minds are recruited, homogenized and harvested by the commanders of globalization. People who are sent to school ostensibly to learn have no option actually but to end up serving globalization’s merciless agenda as its front soldiers.

That is why it is important nowadays to make that elementary distinction between ‘learning’ and ‘education’. Countries such as India, for example, once had an ancient tradition of learning stretching over several centuries with extremely well-known universities such as Nalanda and Takshila, providing a fairly formal system of learning subjects like maths, or languages like Sanskrit and Pali, music, dance, etc. A more rigorous type of learning for the discovery of the self was also endorsed. That quest has never died and neither have the elaborate systems that sustain it. Our cultures never induced us to lower ourselves to the status of rats simply so that we could join a rat race!
These diverse intellectual traditions were gradually swept aside, however, when the country came under colonial rule. This engendered (by force) the dissociation between learning and education that we see more pervasively in our times. The State-sponsored and State-controlled system of education based on promotion of English was introduced by the colonial authorities with very specific objectives in mind:

1) to ensure the study of subjects that would be of use to the State and its’ administration and not directly related to the life or livelihood of the students, and

2) to alienate those being initiated into these subjects systematically from their culture.

In fact, in their arrogance the British administrators decided that the entire baggage of learning, and the objectives of vernacular education, which drew their inspiration and basics from Indian civilization, could be scrapped and substituted with the system known to English society. They had no intention of creating a system of mass schooling – which was non-existent in England in any case at the time – as their only objective was to create a mediator class between themselves and the local population.

For this reason schooling became an enterprise through which students would learn artificial subjects in artificial environments, mostly from text books and always in silence. These subjects would be taught relentlessly by curtailing the natural inclination to learn, to talk, to follow one’s curiosity. To ensure allegiance and success, students would be evaluated in respect of these subjects through examinations. Since the administrators had decided that nothing of India’s intellectual culture was of any use for this purpose, they ensured that the schooling system would de-culturalize the pupils and cut off, as far as possible, their links with the culture into which they were born.

Surprisingly, this wholly artificial system of education with its’ in-built bias against the nurturing of culture, and its antipathy to natural learning, was actually adopted by the Indian government after Independence (just as other colonial countries’ newly independent governments would adopt without much change the colonially installed systems in their own countries). In our times, the objectives of colonial education have only slightly expanded to include the demand to service the global economy, managed by corporations and institutions and their immense greed to process the resources of nature beyond their sustainable yield.

The requirements of globalization, in terms of an educated workforce, are quite distinct from the needs of administering a State, or meeting the needs of local communities. Or, for that matter, every individual’s freedom to learn what he or she desires or loves.

The processes of natural learning are still thriving in vernacular environments, because such situations respect culture and are firmly rooted in it. Vernacular learning, and the globalizing educational monolith, are today at two extreme ends of the spectrum of human experience. Vernacular learning has stubbornly resisted modern education ever since the latter was introduced to India by the Minute of Lord Macaulay in 1835.

The problem with modern education is that it forces individuals to suppress or downgrade their own individual life projects, expending their lives instead on implementing projects designed by others, by corporations and sometimes even by the State.

And herein lies the fundamental disjunct between learning and present day education. On the one hand we are continuously told (and believe) that every individual is unique or, as in Hindu mythology, the result of his or her own past karmas, and therefore born with the inalienable right and potential to find his or her own liberation or freedom. No system of recruitment for employment, with however glamorous or attractive the rewards, can substitute for that desire. In actual fact, the educational system we offer today is nothing more than a conduit by which he must subject his dreams to the machinations or demands of some entity other than him or herself.

Vernacular education aims at objectives that completely militate against this impoverished view of human beings and their place on the planet. We can count our blessings that, despite all the blandishments of modernity, it continues to thrive.
Gustavo Esteva, Mexico

Colonization, development and globalization did not paralyze us. Our dignity has given us strength and the courage to resist. Neither do terrorism and counter-terrorism intimidate us. Today, our dignity nourishes a new hope of liberation.

I speak for myself. I do not pretend to represent anybody. I use a cultural ‘we’, woven into my world of indigenous people, campesinos and marginalized urban dwellers. It is the first person plural of ordinary men and women in the Two/Thirds World. Their growing dignity now poses a challenge to all existing economic and political systems and firmly states that ‘enough is enough’.

Open and wide coalitions of the discontented refuse to be constrained by the powers that are and come together at every meeting of the IMF, the WTO, all the Big and the Powerful. We celebrate, with their shared ‘no’, the multiplicity of ‘yes’s’ that affirms the diversity of our traditions, hopes and initiatives.

At the same time, we resist illusions of social engineering promoted by both conventional and alternative globalizers. We will never again trade our dreams and autonomous capacities for promises of unlimited prosperity and infinite justice through global political designs. We recognize that to change the world is very difficult, if not impossible. But instead of transmogrifying our present into an ever-postponed future, in the name of whatever universal ideology or global project, we apply our energy and imagination to creating a whole new world in our own places, in the present.

Our strength is rooted in the humble recognition of our human limitations. We can only act on a human scale, necessarily local and situated. In reclaiming, regenerating and creating anew our long displaced commons, we cultivate our common sense, the sense we have in community, which binds us under mutual obligations and respect in the healing expressions of personal relationships.

In the shapeless space of the market and the State, we have moulded our places. Here, we recover and regenerate our plural definitions of the good life. We humbly celebrate this diversity and smile at those trumpeting ‘universal’ values or environmental, technological or economic catechisms in which uniformity and standardisation are both premises and desirable outcomes of the human adventure.

Our art of living-and-dying liberates us from dependency to systems in which nouns like nutrition, education or health operate as traps which simultaneously catch and exclude. We recover our verbs. We revalue the meaning of ‘bread-labour’. In re-embedding food into agri-‘culture’ we keep comida at the centre of our lives, eating it slowly from our communal tables. In refusing to disconnect learning and studying from living, we dissolve the oppressive class division between the ‘educated’ and the ‘un-educated’ or the ‘under-educated’.

We regenerate our autonomous capacity to feel and stay well, supported by diverse medical traditions. We thus heal from Health, which has become a pathogenic system, with hospitals devoid of hospitality. We inhabit our vernacular places, where our art of settling flourishes, resisting the pressure of public and private developers, always trying to reduce us to mere residents/commuters.

98. The complete article, The Invention of Convivial Paths, of which the above is an extract, can be consulted on the NFE webpage of the UNESCO Literacy portal.
In remembering our traditions, we have remembered ourselves in our families and communities. We rediscover that most of what we want can be crafted by people like us. We refuse to reduce our human condition to the role of atomised producers or consumers, plugged into one abstract, globalized market, ruled by corporations and reinforced by the State. We reclaim and regenerate our own traditions of exchange in a million differentiated markets. We retain in them the face-to-face contact that is the secret for real cultural interaction. We keep them in our hands, through local moneys and other social tools, protecting our autonomy.

We, the marginal peoples, are thus marginalizing the globalized market and escaping from the false dilemma between ‘free trade’ and ‘protectionism’. One implies subordination to transnational corporations and international institutions, the other, to bureaucracies. We distrust both. We bring the control of trade and investment to our places, where we directly define what we want or do not want.

Representative democracy can be an appropriate umbrella for our political initiatives. But we are transcending it. We govern ourselves in local political bodies. In dismantling the structure of domination of nation-states, we reinvent national and transnational political fields for the harmonious coexistence of differentiated cultures and communities, in which political and juridical procedures can be used to express social consensus.

Our localisation is not the inverse of globalization, a mere reaction to global forces. Our dignified initiatives water the roots of our traditions and celebrate our dreams, blessings and autonomy. We are thus enclosing the enclosers, building over the ruins left by colonisers and developers with our own ways of living. As the Zapatistas say, in the new world we are creating many worlds that can be embraced.
Following is a list of the films produced in the framework of search/re-search:

   For copies please contact abhivyakti@sancharnet.in or shikshantar@yahoo.com

   Shri Dayalchand Soni is the first person featured in the Swaraj Stories series. At over 80-years-old, Dayalchand Soni lives today in Udaipur, Rajasthan, India. The film captures his rich and significant life, as well his thoughts on education and learning. He shares his own experiences as a teacher in an innovative school (inspired by both Gandhi and Tagore) and also powerfully articulates his critique of schooling as detrimental to genuine learning. Heavily influenced by Gandhi and Vinoba, Dayalchand offers his understanding of basic education, the crisis of the present schooling system, the virtues of bread-labor, the beauty and wisdom of the local language (Mewari), and the importance of simple living.

   The video film is one hour long, in Hindi, with English subtitles.

   For copies please contact abhivyakti@sancharnet.in or shikshantar@yahoo.com

   The second film in the Swaraj Stories series features Komal Kothari from Jodhpur, Rajasthan, India. The film is based on a dialogue with Komalda (as he was fondly called by everyone who knew him). In the film, he unfolds the cultural richness and wisdom of people living in rural Rajasthan. He succinctly draws connections and takes us on a journey linking folktales, rituals, livestock, musical instruments, folk songs, land, women, apprenticeships, caste communities, and much more. Komalda reminds us of the power of the ethno-mind; how much we can learn from rural people, about meanings that emerge from seemingly insignificant things connected to their lives and their various socio-cultural practises. The enormous amount of knowledge Komalda generated and his analysis of rural communities is inspiring enough to challenge the dominant, patriarchal and patronising concepts of rural people as so-called ‘backward’, ‘uncivilized’ or ‘illiterate’.

   The video film is one hour long, in Hindi, with English subtitles.

   For copies please contact abhivyakti@sancharnet.in or shilpa@swaraj.org

   The Walk Outs film (stories of several walkouts) attempts to appreciate and celebrate those who choose to ‘walk out’ of school and/or college, rather than continue to be subjected to its uniformity and tyranny. The stories presented in the documentary make evident the diversity of learning available to us – once we move past the stifling walls of schooling and college. More importantly, they show how this learning relates directly with life: its challenges and opportunities. Through peoples’ stories, it also becomes clear that the dominant institutions of education do not work for everyone, and in fact, are causing serious psycho-spiritual violence. Perhaps seeing the lives of real people, hearing their experiences, will invite more people to take their own stories as legitimate and valid. It could inspire them to see where they may ‘walk out’ and how they could start to be active creators of the world they want to live in.

   The video film is 20 minutes in duration, in Hindi with English subtitles.

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99. The Swaraj Stories series shares the lives, experiences and ideas of elderly thinker-doers in India. In their own unique ways, they have attempted to conceptualize innovative frameworks of learning to regenerate **Swaraj** (roughly translated as ‘self-rule’ and ‘radiance of the self’). Many of the people featured in this series were directly or indirectly linked with some of India’s visionaries, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Vinobha Bhave, J. Krishnamurti and Rabindranath Tagore. Their accomplishments span a wide range, from groundbreaking historical study, to organizing people’s movements, to deeply exploring diverse themes like spirituality, freedom and educational reconstruction. Each of these persons has not only sought **Swaraj** in their work, but actually have embodied it in his or her being.
   For copies please contact abhivyakti@sancharnet.in or shikshantar@yahoo.com

   The film is collective co-creation of different film makers from France, India and Lebanon who met during the Learning Societies Conference held at World Social Forum in Mumbai in January, 2004. Together, they share their stories and understandings, as connected to the different thematic sessions hosted in the Learning Societies workshops – on issues such as Urban Living, Community Media, Walking Out and Walking On, Wisdom, etc. The filmmakers reflect on how they understand their own power and that of others; many other people from around the world also share their experiments with alternatives. The film tries to grapple with some of the pressing questions of our times. It suggests that it is possible to move beyond the dominant institutional notions of power. The first step is to recognize and celebrate the power lying within us individually and collectively.

   *The video film is 30 minutes in duration, in English.*

5. **Nuestros Caminos, Una historia de busquedas**, Produced by UNITIERRA, Mexico.
   For copies please contact unitierra@prodigy.net.mx

   Five UNITIERRA students reflect on their personal learning stories leading them to Unitierra: The reasons for rejecting the mainstream in order to carve their own learning paths, the problems they faced at the family and social levels as a result of their decisions and the learning opportunities they discover at Unitierra. This document is a good demonstration of how Unitierra stands as an option to mainstream education.

   *The video film is 25 minutes in duration in Spanish and subtitled in English.*

   For copies please contact elwarsh@starnet.com.eg

   This document starts with a discussion among the El Warsha team of their trainers' experience with women in Menia (exclusively Christian) and Aswan (exclusively Muslim). This was in preparation for the first encounter in Menia between the two groups at the end of the training programme. Questions that came out of this exchange, are used in forum discussions with the women. Training sessions in writing, literary appreciation, and improvisation are included. Individual participants are interviewed and examples of their productions are read in camera. For a better understanding please see article herein.

   *The video film is 25 minutes in duration in Arabic.*
We are grateful to all contributors to this discussion, including those whose thoughts and expressions do not explicitly appear in this publication but rather through the films that they have generated in the process. We asked all contributors for a brief self-portrait describing the crossroads they are standing at, on their learning journeys. We are including here, the descriptions of those who have responded and understand those who have not been able to do so.

**Claude Alvares:** People of my type (academic, pedigreed) would normally classify themselves as specialists, generalists, or even experts. I fall under none of those august categories, since I de-professionalized myself immediately after certification and took shelter in looking after cows and some species of wildlife including snakes and wild boar.

But old habits die hard, and I began a new life under the cover of journalism, acknowledging my continued dependence on the printed word. I even tried to bring academic issues and academic research into journalism, vivisecting science and development policies, combining that with guerrilla journalism. I had to finally kill the urge to use words and texts by suspending my journalism for more than a decade.

Old habits die hard again. So this time, I took the avatar of a publisher and bookseller, making a living selling words and text nicely packaged in bright, flashy covers.

What brought me back to the learning arena was the raising of my three boys, Rahul, Sameer and Milind. I was directly confronted with the stupidity of schools (and later, university). It is this phase really that finally got me to concede that words are a kind of fiction and the only reality they might contain is the printer’s ink. After that, with Mohamed Idris, a un-professionalized intellectual from Malaysia, and a motley crowd of like-minded individuals, we started Multiversity, to focus on the issues relating to learning and higher education. The exposure to direct learning got me involved in a major way with what organic farmers, bereft of scientific advice from institutions devoted exclusively to chemicals, were doing in their own fields turned into interesting learning laboratories.

I am associated with: Other India Press and Bookstore; Multiversity; Taleemnet; the Natural Farming Institute and the Organic Farming Association of India. goafoundation@gmail.com

**Grimaldo Rengifo Vásquez** is presently 59 years of age, father of six children and husband of a wonderful woman with whom he nurtures his four younger children. He studied Education in the first Communal University of Peru, some Anthropology at the Catholic University of Lima, and some Philosophy at the National University of San Marcos. After the part of his life devoted to the development project in the 70s, he took the path of cultural affirmation to found, with some friends, the Andean Project for Peasant Technologies (PRATEC) in 1987. Presently he is coordinator of the Children and Biodiversity Project in thirty Andean communities. g_rengifo@terra.com.pe

**Gustavo Esteva:** My friends describe what I do at the grassroots as the work of a nomadic storyteller. Whenever someone asks for an advice I tell a story. I like to describe myself as a grassroots activist and a deprofessionalized intellectual. I work independently and in conjunction with Mexican, Latin American and international grassroots organizations and networks. In 1996 I was invited by the Zapatistas to be one of their advisors in the negotiations with the government. I am now participating in an effort of cultural regeneration currently involving more than 400 communities, of 10 Indigenous peoples, in Chiapas and Oaxaca, in Southern Mexico. And I live in a small Zapotec village in Oaxaca. gustavoesteva@terra.com.mx

**Marianne Knuth** is the director and Founder of Kufunda Village (www.kufunda.org) in Zimbabwe. Marianne additionally works as an independent facilitator and consultant in the areas of individual and group learning processes, and leadership development. In this arena she has organized several facilitation workshops (the Art of Hosting), and offers team building and organization development retreats.
Over the past three years she has been part of the faculty of the Shambhala Institute (www.shambhala.org) where she has co-facilitated the module on ‘Convening Strategic Conversations’ with Toke Moeller. She has recently joined a team that is developing the Centre for Social Entrepreneurship at the Gordon Institute of Business Science in South Africa. Prior to Kufunda Village, Marianne co-founded Pioneers of Change (www.pioneersofchange.net), a global learning community of committed change agents who come together to connect with their deeper values and ideals, and to generate innovative solutions to challenges faced by their organizations and communities. During her time with Pioneers of Change, she additionally co-ordinated the involvement of African leaders to the global intergenerational leadership initiative ‘From the Four Directions’ (www.fromthefourdirections.org) which was initiated by the Berkana Institute in the US. Marianne holds an M.Sc from the Business School of Copenhagen.

Marianne@pioneersofchange.net

Munir Fasheh: Although I did not use the following words then, as I reflect now on my life since 1971 (mainly in Palestine), the ‘thread’ that gained depth and strength within me over the past 34 years, has been a journey of making sense of my life and my experiences by building on what is beautiful, inspiring, healthy, and abundant (in me, in people, in the community, and in culture). This is true of the voluntary work that I (with some friends) initiated in 1971, the science and math clubs in schools, building on the tremendous knowledge and wisdom embedded in my illiterate mother, the various activities as Dean of Students at Birzeit University, the reading campaign and creating learning environments through Tamer Institute, Qalb el-Umour, Al-jame’ah, and the Arab Education Forum (which I have been directing through the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University since 1998). When a tradition (practice, perception.) harms people or nature, the principle I follow is in harmony with how the Zapatistas put it: changing traditions in traditional ways (i.e., by using what is healthy and without tearing the social spiritual fabric in society). mfasheh@yahoo.com

Nitin Paranjape (Swaraj series video documentation team): I am trying to find spaces to understand who we are and what our purpose in life is. What are we doing in Nashik, a growing city based in north of Maharashtra, India, with my parents who are in their 70s, my spouse, Anita Borkar and our daughter, Sakhi, a teenager who has walked out of school two years ago in order to find her own learning path? I am trying to fulfill my roles as a father, husband, son, brother, colleague, friend, and that of a leader in Abhiyakti, all of them extremely complex, sometimes overlapping and adding to the confusion. My efforts are earnest and the struggle to define my own boundaries and evolve, is indeed worthwhile. I along with Anita, are also engaging in a dialogue within Abhiyakti concerning the transition from our leadership to that of competent colleagues. This again is not as simple as it sounds as both of us have been involved with Abhiyakti since its inception. Although neither of us know what our next destination would be, we think after 18 years with Abhiyakti, it is time to move on, not only for our own evolution as human beings but also for the sake of other competent colleagues and for the organisation. We hope something meaningful emerges and rely on our three main resources: Hope, Creativity and Imagination. sakhanitin@yahoo.com

Sergio Beltrán: Born in Mexico City in the summer of 1969, I have been involved in various activist movements since the age of 15. In 1988 I refused to do my military service and since then I have actively participated in the national movement against obligatory military service in Mexico. In 1997 I walked out of University and shifted to Oaxaca, in order to connect with the indigenous and grassroots movements in Oaxaca. In 2001 I along with other activists and de-professionalized intellectuals, founded the Universidad de la Tierra in Oaxaca, as an alternative to education. I have been coordinating this initiative since 2 years. unitierra@prodigy.net.mx

The freedom to err and the power to correct errors is one definition of Swaraj

M.K. Gandhi, Godhra, Gujarat, November 3, 1917

100. Gupta, P. Joshi, A. Dharampal-Frick, G. 2005, (p. 58) Quintessential Gandhi, Samanvaya, Chennai